FROM THE AUTHOR OF *THOUSAND AUTUMNS*
MENG XI SHI
4
Peerless

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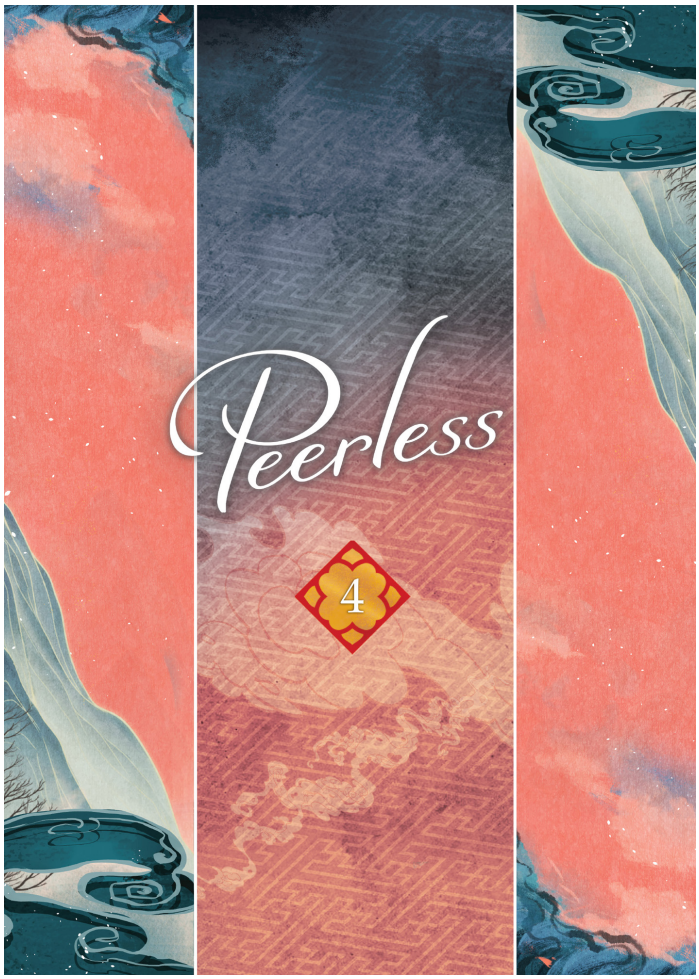
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Chapter 117

THE WINTRY WINDS howled, and the chill pierced him to the bone.

Cui Buqu wore only a flimsy inner robe as he stood on the edge of the cliff, his back to the chasm below. The Jade of Heaven Lake was in his hands, and it needed neither moon nor stars to glow. It glimmered with flashes of dark blues and pale greens, like a rippling spring.

He was baffled. Why had the Jade of Heaven Lake appeared here? He was holding the stone, but he felt neither the expected warmth nor the weight of it in his hand.

Was this a dream?

His thoughts were as chaotic as knotted thread swollen tight with seawater. Impossible to untangle, they sank only deeper with the beating of the waves. He knew he was dreaming, but he couldn't wake himself. In the depths of his confusion, he felt there was something important he still had to do.

Someone was walking toward him, their silhouette growing clearer as they drew near: Feng Xiao.

He held a longsword in one hand, cloaked in an aura of bloodlust. Cui Buqu saw that he was soaked red from head to toe, as if coming fresh from a battlefield on which he'd beheaded countless enemies. The blood on his sword was still wet. It trickled down the blade, painting a crimson trail in his wake. He stopped in front of Cui Buqu. "Give me the jade."

"So you really were pretending to join them?" asked Cui Buqu.

Feng Xiao nodded. "How else could we infiltrate the enemy's lair and capture everyone in one fell swoop?"

"The pavilion leader of the Thirteen Floors. What is their real identity?"

"I haven't managed to learn that yet," said Feng Xiao. "But I killed Fan Yun and the others. The mastermind won't stand for it—sooner or later he'll reveal himself to me."

Feng Xiao's face was spattered with blood, his hair wild. A few strands tugged themselves loose and fell scattered over his temples, but he paid them no heed. His gaze was as keen as a knife, the slant of his mouth cold. The usual relaxed and carefree air he wore when chatting and laughing was nowhere to be seen.

"Give me the jade," he said again, holding out his hand.

"You stabbed me and left me for dead," said Cui Buqu coldly. "I need the jade to heal myself. Why should I give it to you?"

Even in the dream, the two rivals pulled no punches. Neither was willing to concede an inch to the other.

Cui Buqu had no friends—he didn't need any. There would always be more cases for the Zuoyue Bureau to solve, enough to consume any spare moment he might have. Yet somehow, in recent days, Feng Xiao had become inextricable from these cases, to the point that he was present more frequently than Qiao Xian and Zhangsun. On the surface, the two continued to match wits, never overlooking an opportunity to set one another up for a fall. But in reality…

He recalled how, in Boling Commandery, Yuan Sansi had approached him as his mother Lady Yu's shixiong. Step by step, he'd lured Cui Buqu into his trap. It wasn't that Cui Buqu hadn't had moments of suspicion. But due to the pressing nature of their circumstances, his judgment had dulled.

Feng Xiao had eavesdropped on Cui Buqu's conversation with Yuan Sansi from a tree, and had afterward proudly suggested splitting the credit for finding Emperor Xiaowu of Wei's lost treasure. Cui Buqu had taken this as confirmation that everything Yuan Sansi had said was true.

In hindsight, now that Cui Buqu considered it, his thought process had been thus: If even Feng Xiao believed Yuan Sansi, his claims must have some merit. Was this not a sign that Cui Buqu implicitly trusted Feng Xiao? Only at that moment, inside the dream, did Cui Buqu come to realize it.

Ridiculous. To think Cui Buqu, one of the world's wisest men, could make such a blunder.

The freezing winds buffeted his face, as piercingly cold as he remembered. Yet still he couldn't feel the jade stone in his hands: It was as insubstantial as a drifting cloud. He knew this was a dream—yet no matter

how he struggled, he was unable to free himself from it. He remained immersed at the edge of an abyss that seemed both real yet false.

The dream Feng Xiao smiled. “You want the jade. But are you strong enough to hold onto it?”

He thrust his sword at Cui Buqu, lightning-quick. Before Cui Buqu could blink, the blade had pierced his chest. Agony engulfed him. He looked down to see fresh blood dyeing his clothes red. It was déjà vu: The same vivid pain rolled over him a second time. He doubled over, curling his body around the wound.

The bloodstained jade was snatched from his fingers. With a mocking smile, Feng Xiao thrust out a hand and shoved him off the cliff.

The fall was endless. The abyss stretched open its bloody maw to swallow him as the figure staring down at him from the cliff’s edge grew smaller and smaller. The pain sharpened until the sensation consumed him. Cui Buqu opened his mouth to scream, but all he managed was a low moan.

Suddenly there was a bed, cold and hard, beneath him.

He gasped for breath, a film of cold sweat on his forehead. He cracked open his eyes, then closed them again. Even the hazy light of the night pearls embedded in the walls was blinding to someone who’d just woken up. Yet blinding as it was, it also felt real. Cui Buqu didn’t raise a hand to block it out.

It was at this point that he realized someone was sitting beside his bed.

“It’s me.” Feng Xiao’s voice was very low, as if he was wary of being heard. But in this tiny room, it was loud enough to reach Cui Buqu’s ears.

Was this another dream? Cui Buqu’s lips parted in a soft sigh. He’d no idea how long he’d slept. Countless images overlapped, dreams within dreams weaving together to exhaust his energy and drain his mind and body of strength.

“Your heart and lungs are undamaged. I avoided all your vital organs. Though you lost a lot of blood, Fan Yun intervened in time. Once the wound heals, you’ll be as good as new.”

Feng Xiao helped him up and held a bowl for him to drink some water. But Deputy Chief Feng rarely—or perhaps never—waited on others; he tipped the bowl a little too quickly. The remainder splashed all over Cui Buqu's face.

Cui Buqu didn't react. He suspected he was still dreaming, though this dream seemed more absurd and ridiculous than the rest.

"Ah, my mistake." Feng Xiao laughed and raised his sleeve to wipe at the water dripping down Cui Buqu's face. At the sight of Cui Buqu's stoic expression, he couldn't resist saying, "Don't you have anything to ask me?"

"How…" Cui Buqu frowned at the pain in his throat, then said hoarsely, "You had only seconds to act, yet you still avoided my vitals. Did you not even damage my meridians?"

"Take a guess." Feng Xiao watched him expectantly.

Cui Buqu didn't have the strength to roll his eyes, so he simply shut them. *Fine, don't tell me.* Who the hell was bored enough to play a game of riddles in a dream? When Feng Xiao stabbed him after this particular disagreement, he could fall into the next one.

But this time, he felt none of the expected pain between his ribs.

"Hey, don't fall asleep." Feng Xiao reached out and pried Cui Buqu's eyelids open. Cui Buqu was forced to watch as a face thrust itself into his field of vision. "What, is your heart acting up again? Didn't I just give you medicine?"

"Just stab me again already," said Cui Buqu weakly. "Make it quick." This dream was beyond irritating.

"Fine, I'll tell you." Feng Xiao huffed. "You've finally woken up, so why are you playing dead? In Liugong City you had a high fever, and your life was hanging by a thread—that fellow Pei Jingzhe was scared out of his wits. He wanted to find you a doctor, but I stopped him. A doctor? What an astonishing waste of money. My venerable self is a practiced martial artist; I know enough medicine to get by. Back then, I took your pulse myself."

Cui Buqu watched him in silence.

Feng Xiao leaned forward and laid his hand over Cui Buqu's wounded chest, his touch so light Cui Buqu almost didn't feel it. "That's when I found your meridians were disordered and your life force was weak. The position of your heart is off by half an inch. That's why my strike not only avoided all your vital organs but merely grazed your heart. Yes, your meridians are undamaged. If I hadn't moved against you at that moment, or if my actions hadn't been drastic enough, Yuxiu would have been the one to attack. Then you'd be dead for certain."

His lips brushed Cui Buqu's ear as he spoke. He felt the slight warmth of Feng Xiao's breath, lending another touch of reality to the dream. He had just drawn in a breath to admit he owed Feng Xiao a favor when Feng Xiao came to a different conclusion entirely: "So you see, my attempt to save money on a doctor ended up preserving your life."

Suddenly Cui Buqu didn't want to say anything at all.

Feng Xiao took Cui Buqu's wrist and channeled a thread of internal energy. Cui Buqu's cold limbs gradually warmed as a blazing flame kindled to life within his chest. Even the pain retreated to the edges of his awareness.

This was feeling less and less like a dream.

In the dim light, Feng Xiao watched Cui Buqu's eyes flicker, weak and wavering, like two lanterns drifting upon a river—seemingly close, yet far out of reach. After coming to rest on him briefly, they wandered away again. Feng Xiao stretched out a hand and covered his eyes, cupping those lanterns within his palm. Immediately Cui Buqu seemed to steady himself. His eyelids tremored slightly, and his lashes brushed Feng Xiao's palm, tickling him.

"Just relax," Feng Xiao sighed.

This man was nothing special to look at. At most, his eyes and mouth could be considered decently attractive. The wound had aggravated his perpetual look of ill health, like piling snow upon frost. His face radiated sickliness—even his lips were dry and cracked, so pale as to be bloodless. As Feng Xiao watched him, his original desire to fetch more water somehow flew out the window as another urge seized him. He slowly leaned forward until his lips brushed warmth. Only at this touch did Feng Xiao regain his senses and jerk back.

This kiss was different from his previous heartless teasing, which he'd done merely to draw a reaction from Cui Buqu. Feng Xiao realized with a start that he hadn't been thinking at all. Terrifyingly, he'd done it on pure instinct.

Feng Xiao was a rare man who considered even the famous beauty Feng Xiaolian no more enticing than a dry old bone. How could he have fallen for an *invalid?*

Cui Buqu's eyes were covered; he had no idea what had just happened. When the hand blocking them moved away, Feng Xiao was sitting motionless beside the bed, so rigid he seemed to have been struck by a body-freezing spell. After a moment of bafflement, Cui Buqu dismissed Feng Xiao's odd behavior—it wasn't worth his energy. Instead he asked, "How did you come to be in contact with Fan Yun?"

Feng Xiao ignored him. He was submerged in his own tempestuous thoughts.

After a moment of silence, Cui Buqu tried again: "Your hair is a mess."

"Ah?" Feng Xiao shook off his distraction and produced a palm-sized bronze mirror from his sleeve. He turned his face to the night pearls and examined himself with the keen gaze of an expert martial expert as he adjusted his hair. After a moment, he breathed a sigh of relief. "It's not that bad—how is it messy?"

Cui Buqu had had enough. Here they were on the knife's edge between life and death, and Feng Xiao was still fussing over his hair. Of course—this was his true nature! At least, he thought, he could now be certain this wasn't any dream of his. "If you can't…stay long…hurry up and explain. So I can at least prepare myself." Cui Buqu was so feeble his words tumbled out, scattered and uneven.

There was nothing to be gained from keeping secrets at this point. Feng Xiao coughed lightly. "I wasn't in contact with Fan Yun. The one who approached me was Lin Yong. When we were heading back to the capital from Qiemo, he came to me with a small gift. He told me then that Ishbara Khagan has planted several spies in the capital."

Cui Buqu nodded. "I remember he carries a torch for you."

The corner of Feng Xiao's mouth twitched, but he didn't respond to this remark. "We probed each other for information. I let slip that I had recently reached a plateau in my martial arts. After a few cups of wine, I confessed that the emperor didn't trust the Jiejian Bureau, and that's why he'd established the Zuoyue Bureau: so we'd keep each other in check. Lin Yong saw his chance and revealed his identity to me. He doesn't hold a high rank in the Thirteen Floors—only seventh—and that's only because the pavilion leader thought his familiarity with the north would be useful. Otherwise he wouldn't rank above Ning Shewo."

"Has he met the pavilion leader?"

"No. It was Yuxiu who introduced him into the Thirteen Floors. Previously the pavilion leader's envoys were the ones to pass along his orders, but Lin Yong said he'd met Ning Shewo."

Injury hadn't dulled Cui Buqu's wits. "So the pavilion leader resides in the south."

"That's my belief as well," said Feng Xiao. "Lin Yong offered me three incentives for joining them: One, I would receive a noble title from the future emperor for services rendered to the throne. Two, the pavilion leader would share the Refining Jade technique. Three, I could leverage the strength of the new royal court to unify the demonic sects. He even gave me a valuable goodwill gift by order of the pavilion leader: the sarira of Cui Youwang, the former leader of the unified demonic sect."

Now even Cui Buqu was surprised. "A valuable gift indeed!"

Sarira were pearl-like relics, objects sometimes found in the ashes of enlightened monks who passed away in meditation. They embodied the great wisdom of the Buddhist master. Martial arts grandmasters of a certain level might also leave behind sarira when they were cremated. In these cases, the sarira contained all the power the grandmaster had possessed in life. Should any jianghu practitioner get their hands on one, it would have a miraculous effect on their martial arts.

But the sarira of a grandmaster was almost impossible to find—never mind the sarira of the great Cui Youwang. Naturally it would be a strong temptation for Feng Xiao, himself a demonic practitioner.

“But I don’t understand,” said Cui Buqu. “Cui Youwang’s sarira is far more valuable than the Refining Jade technique. Why didn’t the pavilion leader make it one of the incentives? Wouldn’t that be far more tempting?”

Speaking so many words in a row left him short of breath. He coughed, aggravating his blood and qi. His wound ached.

Feng Xiao wrapped his fingers around Cui Buqu’s wrist and continued channeling internal energy into him. Despite the imperious style of his martial arts, his internal energy was gentle, moderated to a perfect flow. Cui Buqu felt not the slightest twinge of discomfort. “Because he isn’t a demonic practitioner,” Feng Xiao said. “He couldn’t verify whether the sarira was genuine. Thus he chose to offer it to me as a favor, hoping to cultivate a reputation as a man who’s generous and worth following.”

“It appears the sarira is genuine.”

“It is,” said Feng Xiao with a smile. “Though there’s only one, it will be a great boon to my internal cultivation. When the pavilion leader realizes he gave it to me for nothing, his heart is sure to ache in regret. For now, he sent a message through Lin Yong that he has two more sarira. If I commit to joining the Thirteen Floors, he’ll give both to me once they achieve their goal.”

Cui Buqu gave a mocking laugh. “Their ‘goal’ is usurping the throne. So the Refining Jade technique was enticement enough for you to set me up.”

“There’s a reason I didn’t tell you in advance. The few words Lin Yong passed on made it clear there was someone in the Thirteen Floors who knew you very well—someone who was even familiar with your past. I suspected Qiao Xian or Zhangsun.”

Cui Buqu frowned. “So you said nothing to me when I sent Zhangsun to Donghai Commandery.”

“Precisely. I didn’t know who the spy was, what position they held, or how much they knew. Of course I thought it best to say nothing. I was certain they’d try to recruit you, but I didn’t expect you to be so steadfast and unyielding in your refusal. What happened to all that cunning? Did you truly plan on letting Yuxiu torture you to death if I sat back and did nothing?”

Cocking his head, Cui Buqu asked, “When you looked at me, weren’t you hinting that I shouldn’t accept?”

“I was telling you to play along.” Feng Xiao saw what Cui Buqu was about. “Don’t try to push the blame onto me or extract compensation. I’m telling you—this time, you brought this on yourself. These are your just deserts.”

Cui Buqu blinked twice, slowly, then said with great difficulty, “You’d already joined them. If you were really a member of the Thirteen Floors and saw me cooperate so readily, wouldn’t you presume something was afoot? Fan Yun definitely would, and if you remained silent, he’d have suspected you too. So you see, my sacrifice was all to protect *you*—”

Feng Xiao clapped his hand over Cui Buqu’s mouth, rendering him unable to utter another word. “Shut up. The next time I stab you, your lordship, I won’t miss.” Feng Xiao’s voice was low as he hissed, “I promise I’ll kill you with a single thrust!”

Cui Buqu neither resisted, nor struggled, nor made a sound. He simply looked up at him quietly. When he was peaceful like this, he appeared especially docile and meek, a sight all the more precious for its rarity. Satisfied, Feng Xiao was about to speak a few more acerbic words when they both heard a noise from outside.

Feng Xiao’s head snapped around toward the door.

Chapter 118

THE STONE DOOR slid slowly open. Fan Yun stepped in.

Cui Buqu was lying on the bed, his breathing even. He appeared sound asleep, but Fan Yun asked him without preamble, “Feeling better?”

Clearly he knew Cui Buqu was awake. No matter how well someone feigned sleep, their breathing would give them away—no martial expert would be fooled. Fan Yun ignored the *Please leave* written all over Cui Buqu’s face and sat down by the bed.

“I know you’re upset with me. Your teacher indeed owes you. But to achieve my goal, I won’t hesitate, even if it means sacrificing lives. You and I each serve our own masters. Since you refuse to join us willingly, how else was I to draw you here?”

After shooting him a cold look, Cui Buqu closed his eyes again. “Since the two Jin dynasties, countless visionaries have thrown their weight into moving the world. All of them met tragic ends. They had armies and weapons. Everything was in their favor: time, place, people. They were in a far better position to succeed than this pavilion leader of yours. Xiansheng, with all your wisdom, do you really believe he can achieve what he claims?”

Fan Yun appeared unconcerned. “There are many things people attempt despite knowing they are impossible. Man proposes, and heaven disposes. Buqu, you say time and place were in their favor. Then you should know that, just as some visionaries succeeded due to fortunate timing, others failed precisely despite their favorable placement. Take Yang Jian, for instance, who usurped the throne through his daughter’s connection to the emperor. Bluntly, he rose to power because of a woman. Though history will remember his name, the stigma can never be erased. You shouldn’t underestimate the pavilion leader. He’s more capable than you can imagine.”

Cui Buqu sneered. “He’s gathered so many martial arts masters and has pawns like Feng Xiao and Yuan Sansi planted within the imperial court

—not to mention a strategist like you, Fan-xiansheng. He is indeed quite capable.”

“Is that all you think he has?” asked Fan Yun meaningfully.

At that, Cui Buqu narrowed his eyes, but Fan Yun didn’t continue. Instead, he took a porcelain bottle from his lapels. “This is a medicine that nourishes blood and qi. It’s no poison—it’ll do you good. Whether you take it or not is up to you. Rest well.”

He patted Cui Buqu’s shoulder, then rose to leave. The stone door rumbled shut behind him.

Feng Xiao leapt down from a shadowed corner of the stone chamber’s ceiling and set about brushing the dust and cobwebs from his clothes. “He sensed me.”

The interaction of qi between martial experts was subtle. Feng Xiao had concealed himself flawlessly the entire time, and Fan Yun had never once glanced toward his hiding spot. Yet he was certain Fan Yun had discovered him.

This was no surprise. Hiding in such a small room was a difficult task in the first place. Feng Xiao had been fully prepared to fight Fan Yun. But though Fan Yun had discovered him, he hadn’t exposed him. Feng Xiao couldn’t fathom why.

He picked up the bottle of medicine Fan Yun had left behind. Pulling out the stopper, he gave it a sniff, then replaced it and tucked the bottle into his lapels. “No matter what that old man has in mind, you’d best not touch it.”

Cui Buqu watched him take the bottle without comment. “He said just now that many attempt great things despite knowing they’re impossible. This was a passerby’s evaluation of Confucius,[1] praising him as a man of great wisdom and courage, someone who pursued his ideals in the face of insurmountable obstacles. By applying it to himself, Fan Yun is saying he has his own troubles. He seemed to hint that the pavilion leader’s subordinates aren’t limited to the people we’re aware of—that he’s holding a trump card we have yet to discover.”

“Are you saying Fan Yun’s a double agent, toiling away patiently in enemy territory?” Feng Xiao scoffed. “He stood back and watched as I

stabbed you in the heart. What an exemplary double agent; he certainly gives the role his all!”

Cui Buqu sighed. “There’s another possibility.”

Feng Xiao frowned. “He’s not with the Thirteen Floors, but he’s not on our side either.”

“Yes. He and I have known each other for many years; he knows what kind of person I am,” Cui Buqu said gravely. “He’s wise enough to guess that even if I submit, I would always chafe at being manipulated and am almost certain to stir up trouble.”

Feng Xiao found this observation deeply amusing. “This is the first time I’ve seen someone so happy to call themselves a troublemaker.”

Cui Buqu regarded him expressionlessly, and Feng Xiao reached out and flicked his forehead. “If your body and mind are at ease, your ailments will heal themselves. I’m just helping you recover faster. You should thank me.”

A moment of tolerance would bring lasting peace. Cui Buqu closed his eyes and continued, “Since Fan Yun didn’t strike at you, we can assume he won’t expose you to Yuxiu and the others for now. You came to infiltrate the enemy’s lair. What preparations have you made?”

This baffled Feng Xiao. “What do you mean, preparations?”

“Surely you weren’t simply planning on fighting your way out alone?” Cui Buqu’s voice rose slightly in exasperation, but he started coughing before he could say more.

“Yours truly is a man of peerless wisdom and courage who can take down a hundred men singlehanded. Why would I need anyone’s help?” Feng Xiao asked in surprise.

A moment of tolerance would bring lasting peace… *To hell with fucking peace!* Cui Buqu heaved himself up to grab the empty water bowl and flung it at Feng Xiao.

Feng Xiao caught it easily and set it on the table. He smiled and said in a soothing tone, “Look at you, so irritable even when you’re injured. Don’t you want to get better? I’ve had a card up my sleeve since leaving the

capital: I ordered Lao-San to bring some men and tail us. He's waiting in Raoyang, which borders Anping."

Now that he was talking sense, Cui Buqu calmed down. Even so, his outburst had induced another coughing fit.

Feng Xiao secretly found his flustered reaction hilarious. He poured another half a bowl of warm water and offered it to Cui Buqu. "I didn't know anything about Mount Tiannan either. I only sent word to Lao-San after Yuan Sansi told us about it. They should have been en route when we set off, but without anyone to guide them, so it'll take them some time to find this place. Not to mention there's the Ursa Major Twin Jade Array, which will slow them considerably. I don't imagine there's anyone other than you and Fan Yun who can break it?"

"Correct," said Cui Buqu. "They may not find us unless we create some kind of disturbance to draw them here."

"I'll think of something," said Feng Xiao. "You should get some rest. Daoist Master Cui, who knows how long you can soldier on with that broken-down body of yours? You should moderate your temper, lest you find yourself in the underworld before you've had a chance to defeat the Thirteen Floors of Yunhai."

"As long as you don't anger me, I'll be fine," said Cui Buqu coldly.

Feng Xiao blinked, then struck out with lightning speed and tapped Cui Buqu's sleep acupoint. As Cui Buqu slumped, Feng Xiao caught him and laid him down on the bed. Forced into sleep, the crease between Cui Buqu's brows remained, as if his still-spiraling thoughts rendered him unable to slumber in peace. Feng Xiao spent a minute rubbing the crease to smooth it out. It was only in moments like this that Cui Buqu looked so harmless and fragile.

But he only looked it. Not only was he possessed of a venomous tongue, this man carried in his chest a heart of stone. There was nothing he wouldn't do to achieve his goals. He had an ungovernable temper and was impossible to placate, though his ailing body was like a candle flame guttering in the wind, on the verge of going out. Even his name—Cui Buqu—had a cold and alienating air, like a mountain boulder that had weathered winds and rain, frost and snow. It did not require the understanding of strangers, nor the intimacy of potential friends.

To be cursed with the misfortune of falling in love with a man like this, the crimes of one's past life must have been unforgivable.

Yet here was Feng Xiao, handsome and dashing, a man of unparalleled elegance. The instant he opened his mouth, beauties lined up at his door. Even Feng Xiaolian, a woman captivating enough to topple nations, had desired a night with him, to say nothing of the countless other men and women who'd vied for his favor—his admirers were everywhere.

The heavens hadn't only bestowed him with uncommon beauty; they'd also gifted him with extraordinary intelligence. Growing up, whatever he wished to learn, whatever he wished to obtain, he did so while barely lifting a finger. Even the position of Fajing sect leader, one countless demonic practitioners coveted and bled for, had been tossed to him like a hot potato simply because the previous leader desired him as a successor.

Feng Xiao wasn't one of those hypocrites who remained outwardly reserved despite inward arrogance. He really did feel that in all the world's vastness, few could keep pace with him. Cui Youwang, Yan Wushi, and the other leaders of the demonic sects might be his match in martial arts, but Feng Xiao was certain that when it came to beauty and brains, he was their superior by a wide margin.

How could a man as perfect and peerless as himself fall in love with an invalid who was practically on death's doorstep? Not only did Feng Xiao refuse to believe it, if he told anyone else, he suspected they wouldn't believe it either.

Feng Xiao glanced left and right, then plucked a night pearl from the stone wall. He shone the light over Cui Buqu's face but still couldn't see anything special about it. An average nose, an average brow. The eyes and mouth were somewhat better, but only somewhat. They couldn't match even one-tenth of his splendor.

He suddenly recalled that wretched situation they'd found themselves in together outside Liugong City. Like two mountain tigers trapped on the plains, they'd fled for their lives on the border of the Gobi. At the time, they'd each had their own agendas, yet they'd put aside their differences to cooperate temporarily, huddling in that cave beneath the cliff as they waited out the blizzard and the night.

Cui Buqu had even forced Feng Xiao to call him *Daddy* three times. Back then, Feng Xiao had silently sworn that the moment he extricated himself, he'd make this sickly man kneel on the ground and cling to his legs while calling him *Daddy* in return. And what had been the result? Instead of looking down upon him in disdain, that sickly man's face, when he looked upon it, now gave him a burst of spontaneous joy.

This simply would not do.

His thoughts raced. He reached out and placed his hand on the nape of Cui Buqu's neck, his palm flush against Cui Buqu's skin. Feng Xiao could feel, beneath his warmth, the feeble pulse of his life. He slowly tightened his grip.

There was no evidence of pain in Cui Buqu's expression. He was exhausted from injury, his acupoints sealed. He'd already sunk into a deep slumber, his face now smooth and tranquil. He'd struggled over half his life, experienced what it was to wander destitute from place to place, and all there was of the kindness and callousness within people's hearts. For him, dying like this, in peace, might be a kind of relief.

This cave thronged with masters like trees in a forest. Traps lay around every corner, and danger stalked them with every step. Fan Yun, Yuxiu, and Yuan Sansi were challenge enough, to say nothing of the pavilion leader, who'd yet to reveal himself. If Feng Xiao hoped to escape unscathed, he'd need to pick his opportunities carefully. And now he also had Cui Buqu to worry about. Even if this man had hundreds of tricks up his sleeve, no amount of ideas could prevent him from being a burden in this situation.

Cui Buqu was unhealthily thin. His neck was long and slender—the slightest pressure would be sufficient to snap it.

Then Cui Buqu would no longer breathe, much less sneer at Feng Xiao, spit his cutting words, or seethe with nefarious thoughts as he sought every possible chance to screw over the Jiejian Bureau. And Feng Xiao would be as free as a bird soaring over the mountains and rivers. No longer would he have any weaknesses.

There were countless benefits to be had and no disadvantages to speak of. And yet—he couldn't do it. The reason for this could be summed up in six words: He couldn't bear to lose this.

He couldn’t bear to lose the acid words that pelted him like a corrosive rain. He couldn’t bear to lose the arched brow that accompanied the sneering curl of that lip. He couldn’t even bear to lose the way this man said *Deputy Chief Feng*, in a tone that was seven parts ridicule and three parts scheming.

What on earth was so great about this invalid?! Feng Xiao withdrew his hand from Cui Buqu’s neck and sighed. He lowered his head and pressed his lips to the supple warmth of Cui Buqu’s own, slowly exploring the contours of his mouth. Then he bit down viciously.

Had he known this would happen, he would have stabbed this man to death in the Gobi. Why else would he make such trouble for himself?

Chapter 119

UPON LEAVING the stone chamber, Feng Xiao followed Fan Yun's instructions and proceeded to the main hall at the center of the cave complex. These halls were full of twists and turns, with many intersecting paths and secret passages. He had yet to learn them all, and in any case, he had only joined the Thirteen Floors recently. Fan Yun and the others were still wary of him; they wouldn't tell him everything yet.

He met the occasional maid or guard along the way. Those who recognized him stopped and bowed in greeting, but were otherwise reticent. If he waylaid them to ask who they were or where they came from, they dared not answer fully. Their accents were mixed, some from the north and some the south, but it was clear they'd been trained on their duties here. From their ashen complexions, he guessed they hadn't seen the sun for a long time. They'd likely been taken on when this cavern had first been turned into the Thirteen Floors' base.

Feng Xiao thought they resembled shambling corpses who'd been roaming their tombs for years on end. A chilly gloom hung about them, and they didn't look amenable to bribes. He observed them for a while but couldn't spot any weaknesses. He'd have to set his sights elsewhere.

Based on his own observations and his discussion with Cui Buqu, he'd guessed that this natural cave was circular. Tunnels had been dug leading from the various winding passages to the main hall in the center. And if anyone wished to leave, they'd have to pass through the Ursa Major Twin Jade Array.

Cui Buqu had explained roughly how to pass through the array, but he had cautioned that, while the array took Ursa Major as its focal point, it possessed a kaleidoscope of possible changes based on the twenty-eight constellations of traditional astrology. Any slight adjustment made by the creator could set one's head spinning, and anyone attempting to traverse it would be trapped with no hope of reorienting themselves.

Now that Feng Xiao considered it, Fan Yun's suggestion to lure Cui Buqu here was itself worthy of scrutiny. Fan Yun had to know that, as his

disciple, Cui Buqu had also mastered the Ursa Major Twin Jade Array. Did he wish to pit Cui Buqu and Feng Xiao against the Thirteen Floors of Yunhai?

If so, who was behind Fan Yun? The Southern dynasty? Goguryeo?

Feng Xiao reordered his wandering thoughts and temporarily cast Fan Yun from his mind. He couldn't see the rising or setting of the sun and moon within the cave, and had no notion of whether it was night or day. Leaving the cave would be too much trouble, and though he had an hourglass in his chambers, he was too lazy to turn back for it. After a quick calculation, Feng Xiao guessed it was the morning of the seventh day of the seventh month—the day of the Qixi Festival, on which the pavilion leader was due to arrive.

Neither Feng Xiao nor Cui Buqu had ever met the leader of the Thirteen Floors. Considering Yuxiu and Yuan Sansi's martial abilities and temperaments, Feng Xiao knew common interest wasn't enough to bring them together under an inferior master. The pavilion leader must at the very least be equally capable, a powerful martial arts practitioner.

In his mind, Feng Xiao went down the list of martial experts he knew. The interests of most martial grandmasters lay beyond the pursuit of political power. They instead yearned to explore the upper reaches of the mountain known as martial arts. Cui Youwang had been one such example. If he hadn't continued pushing to increase his martial prowess and triggered a qi deviation, the demonic grandmaster would likely still be among the living.

After discarding those with no interest in political affairs, only a few candidates remained. Feng Xiao even briefly considered whether the emperor of Southern Chen was the elusive master himself. But the current emperor of Chen was extravagantly wasteful and cared only for singing and dancing. He simply wasn't capable of orchestrating a plot on this scale.

Feng Xiao's thoughts quickened with his pace. Before he knew it, light was shining before him—he'd reached the guest hall.

Several people who'd been conversing among themselves turned around. One hurried over, his face animated with surprise and joy. "Yuntian! I missed you dearly the entire way here!"

Feng Xiao's lips twitched slightly. He smiled. "It's been a while, Young Estate Master Lin."

If only Cui Buqu were capable of words like *I missed you dearly.…*

He imagined Cui Buqu's pale face flushing crimson as he was forced to stammer those words. He didn't break out in gooseflesh at the thought; instead, his lips curved in secret anticipation.

What an awful pity that Daoist Master Cui would never say such a thing.

The man who'd hurried over was of course none other than Lin Yong, the young master of Yandang Mountain Estate, ranked seventh among the directors of the Thirteen Floors of Yunhai.

Feng Xiao had become acquainted with Lin Yong by chance years ago. But he'd quickly sensed something darker lurking beneath the man's frivolous demeanor and had sent someone to investigate. Sure enough, the true Lin Yong was nothing like the carefree and spirited image he presented. He tortured his servants, whipping them with steel cords for the slightest infraction. More than a few corpses were transported out of his estate every month.

The Lin family had made their fortune traveling between the Central Plains and the Western Regions to trade silk and porcelain, but after Lin Yong took over, Yandang Mountain Estate had pivoted to providing escort services and weapon-smithing instead. This young man was far from the simple fool he appeared to be.

During their recent meeting in the capital, Lin Yong had noticed Feng Xiao's apparent frustration with the emperor, and, after probing him, had taken the chance to reveal his identity and invite him into the Thirteen Floors. Feng Xiao had made a show of reluctance, outplaying Lin Yong at his own game.

Lin Yong had long been interested in Feng Xiao and thought the two of them quite close; he thus greeted him warmly: "It's been many days since we met, but Yuntian is as charming as ever," he said, smiling as he spoke. But a hint of resentment colored his words as he continued. "You're one of us now; why are you still saying *Young Estate Master* this, *Young Estate Master* that? Please, call me by my courtesy name, Huaya."

“I’m too used to it. You’ll have to be patient with me!” Feng Xiao laughed and turned his gaze to the man behind Lin Yong. “And this must be Guild Leader Ning?”

Ning Shewo stepped forward and cupped his hands in greeting. “Feng-gongzi lives up to his reputation, as radiant as jade.”

Although Ning Shewo was over fifty and had grown stout in his old age, his palms were noticeably darker than the rest of him. It was obvious at a glance that he trained in some kind of palm technique and shouldn’t be underestimated.

Lin Yong couldn’t hide his displeasure as Feng Xiao ignored him to greet Ning Shewo instead.

“He has no interest in you,” said a voice at his ear. “Why delude yourself?”

Lin Yong’s face grew stormy as he turned to Yuxiu. Then he smiled. “If you hadn’t lost that eye, I’d speak pleasantly to you too. It’s a pity your looks are no longer worthy of your reputation. Perhaps His Highness the Prince of Jin felt the same way. Is that why he discarded you, his loyal pawn?”

Yuxiu sneered. “Just because you’re a cut-sleeve, you think everyone is. If not for my respect for the pavilion leader, I’d have killed you long ago.”

Some of those present were in charge of canal transport in the south, while others amassed riches within the Northern dynasty. Fan Yun was a walking treasury of knowledge, and Yuxiu was a man daring enough to masquerade as a Göktürk khagan, who’d stirred up a tempest with a flip of his hand. True, Cui Buqu had dashed his plans and rendered him a fugitive, but he’d still been the counselor of the Prince of Jin. He’d been privy to many of the prince’s secrets and knew a great deal about what went on behind the scenes at the imperial court.

Their current company alone was capable of whipping up towering waves. Even without the aid of Feng Xiao and Cui Buqu, overthrowing a dynasty might not be an impossible dream with sufficient preparation. However, these were all great men from across the land. Though the same

goal might bring them together for now, none were willing to submit to any of the others.

When Yuxiu had been counselor to the Prince of Jin, he'd presented himself as cultured and refined, with an elegant, serene bearing. Now, after his drastic change in circumstances, he no longer held back his temper. Not only did he openly show his distaste for Lin Yong, Feng Xiao had noted the unconcealed bloodlust in his gaze the few times their eyes met.

Yuxiu had never forgotten for a moment his hatred of Feng Xiao for the loss of his eye, but Feng Xiao was no pushover himself. Now that he was also a member of the Thirteen Floors of Yunhai, Yuxiu couldn't kill him. All he could do was vent his rage on Cui Buqu in his place.

"Enough!" said Fan Yun, intervening before Lin Yong could retort. "Both of you are directors of the Thirteen Floors. You must set your disagreements aside and focus on the larger picture. The pavilion leader has called us here today because he is making preparations."

This got everyone's attention. Yet just as Fan Yun was about to say more, he looked around and asked, "Where is our fourth director, Si-xiansheng?"

He was talking about Yuan Sansi.

"I haven't seen him since last night," said Yuxiu.

Feng Xiao smiled. "I have." As the assembly turned to him, he finished, "At Feng Xiaolian's door."

Understanding dawned on everyone's faces; only Fan Yun leveled him with that same meaningful gaze.

As if on cue, a voice rang out from the entrance: "Feng Xiao! You low-life cur!"

Yuan Sansi had appeared in the guest hall just in time to hear Feng Xiao's words. He immediately struck out with a fist.

Unruffled, Feng Xiao parried with his fan. Yuan Sansi's every move was ruthless and left no room to breathe. Though a fight had erupted in the guest hall, no one intervened. On the contrary, everyone stepped back to give them space, avidly watching the battle unfold. All of them wanted to know: Who was stronger?

Feng Xiao had no interest in an all-out battle with Yuan Sansi. He deliberately pulled the fighting toward Fan Yun and ducked behind him, using him as a shield. Fan Yun had no choice but to stop them. “Enough! Si-xiansheng, tell us what happened.”

“Feng Xiaolian is dead!” Yuan Sansi roared.

Everyone was stunned. Such an incredible beauty, dead? Even Lin Yong, who had little interest in women, thought it an upsetting waste. “When?!”

Though Feng Xiaolian ranked at the bottom of the Thirteen Floors and was the weakest practitioner among them, she was by no means an easy target. Besides, who could bear to end the life of such a stunning beauty?

Yuan Sansi fixed his gaze on Feng Xiao. “Last night I heard you and Feng Xiaolian speaking privately in your room. The next day she’s dead. How do you explain this?”

“What is there to explain?” asked Feng Xiao innocently. “If anything had happened between me and Feng Xiaolian, I’d still be out cold right now. How could I be standing before you, bouncing with energy? I have no grudge against her. But Yuan-xiong, your room isn’t next to mine. How did you happen to overhear us? If you wish to frame someone, surely this isn’t the way?”

He turned to Fan Yun again. “I’m the deputy pavilion leader; Yuan Sansi is Si-xiansheng. This is insubordination. What should be done?”

Yuan Sansi sneered. “What deputy leader? The pavilion leader has yet to officially appoint you! Fan-xiansheng and I spent the whole night talking. I only just returned to my chambers, where I found Feng Xiaolian lying dead. The slash across her throat was the work of a zither string. Don’t think I don’t know! In Boling Commandery you received Yuyin and removed its strings to use as a weapon. Who else could have done it, if not you?”

“You were with Fan-xiansheng the entire night?” asked Feng Xiao in a tone of mild confusion. “What did you have to discuss that lasted all night? Fan-xiansheng, is this true?”

Fan Yun pondered before answering. “Actually, we didn’t talk the entire night. Yuan-xiong left sometime after midnight.”

Yuan Sansi looked at him in shock. “I didn’t leave until near dawn! Fan Yun, what did this bastard give you to turn on me?!”

“Yuan-xiong, calm yourself,” Fan Yun said with a frown. “Feng Xiaolian’s death is indeed alarming, but we mustn’t point fingers. We can wait for the pavilion leader’s arrival before we draw any conclusions. Let’s take a look at her first.”

No one raised any objections. With Fan Yun standing between, Yuan Sansi was forced to give up. He glared once more at Feng Xiao and turned to leave. Yet he’d taken merely two steps when his expression changed, and he faltered. “What’s that smell?”

“Fire!” cried Lin Yong in shock.

Before anyone else could react, the pounding footsteps of the guards came from outside, voices raised to call for help with the flames. Feng Xiao’s heart thumped as he recalled Cui Buqu, whose sleep acupoint he’d struck not long ago.

“Talk once we’re outside!” roared Fan Yun.

The ground shook violently, and dust and loose rock cascaded down from the ceiling. Everyone went pale. Feng Xiao no longer hesitated—he slipped to the front of the group and dashed out the door.

Eyes glinting, Yuxiu followed a step behind.

Chapter 120

MOST FIRES STARTED small. But Fan Yun and the others were in the center of the cave, far away from anywhere a fire might have started. If they could smell it from here, the flames had already spread.

A low rumble sounded as the ceiling trembled; more stones came clattering down. Outside the cave, the promised storm had arrived: Wind and thunder raged, but there was no rain. Lightning struck the cliffs, shaking the mountainside.

The cave had several vents, too small for even a child to crawl through. Now, wind howled through these crevices and filled the inhabitants' hearts with unease. As cries of "Fire!" went up through the caverns, a small uproar broke out. Fanned by the wind, the fire quickly spread.

Even ants strove to preserve their own lives. No matter how numb their training had made them, the maids and guards were still human. This was a remote place, far from help, and getting in or out was nigh impossible. Unable to escape, they began to panic.

The kitchen was the only place with firewood, as much of the cave was lit by night pearls—the fire could only have started there. Everyone crammed into the corridors. Some rushed to the kitchen to help douse the fire, while others fled to the entrance of the cave without looking back. Those who went to the kitchen soon found they were too late. Some villain had poured out a trail of lamp oil to feed the flames; there was no hope of getting the fire under control.

In the midst of the chaos, Feng Xiao ran in a different direction entirely.

He'd struck Cui Buqu's sleep acupoint, sending him into a deep slumber. If no one brought him out of it, Cui Buqu wouldn't wake in time to notice the fire. By the time it reached his door, there would be no escape; the mighty chief of the Zuoyue Bureau would burn to death. Such a death

was jarringly unsuited to his crafty, resourceful personality—Feng Xiao was afraid Cui Buqu would come back as a ghost and drag him to hell too.

Someone had plucked the night pearls from the stone walls of the corridors. Without their light, the cave was dark, the air thick with sparks and smoke. Even Feng Xiao found it hard to breathe. After finally groping his way to Cui Buqu's chambers, he pushed open the door, only to be greeted with an empty bed.

Feng Xiao's heart sank. Before he could turn, a mocking laugh came from behind him. "So you really did fake joining us! But your collusion with him was real!"

A palm blast carrying the pungent smell of smoke accompanied his words, sweeping toward the Gate of Life—a fatal acupoint—on Feng Xiao's lower back. Feng Xiao's reaction was instantaneous. The moment Yuxiu spoke, Feng Xiao was already drifting forward. Without looking back, he leapt into the air and pushed off the stone wall before him, reversing course to meet Yuxiu's palm with his own.

There was a loud *bang*, and the tiny chamber quaked, unable to withstand the violent force of their true qi. Debris tumbled down, but the combatants were unscathed. They sprang apart so fast they appeared as little more than smudges of shadow. In the darkness, those shadows interwove. Only their opponent's breaths gave a clue as to their next move. Each judgment was made in a split second; the combatants seemed to flicker between the land of the living and the realm of the dead.

If not for Cui Buqu and Feng Xiao, Yuxiu would still have been beside the Prince of Jin as his confidant and counselor. The Prince of Jin was young, and an admirer of all things beautiful. Though he hadn't laid a hand on Yuxiu, a subtle and inexpressible suggestiveness had colored their relationship as the two had grown closer. Yuxiu had been only too happy to use this intimacy to his advantage.

The plans of the Thirteen Floors of Yunhai were vast and sprawling, their agents embedded both within the court and without. Yuxiu, confidant to the Prince of Jin, was one of them. He didn't mind serving the pavilion leader and helping with his grand plans, but the only person he truly cared for was Princess Qianjin. If the pavilion leader succeeded, Princess Qianjin would gain her freedom, and she and Yuxiu could be together. After several years of scheming, everything had seemed to be falling into place; they had merely lacked a timely opportunity.

Yet their perfect game of chess had been completely overturned by Cui Buqu and Feng Xiao.

Originally, the Jiejian and Zuoyue Bureaus were designed to keep each other in check. But at some unknown point, they'd begun working together instead. Cui Buqu was sly and cunning, while Feng Xiao was a powerful fighter. Alone, neither of them was much to fear—but together? Yuxiu had seen the results with his own eyes. Back in the Western Khaganate, he would have killed Cui Buqu easily had Feng Xiao not intervened and thrown all his plans into disarray. If Cui Buqu had died, the Zuoyue Bureau would be a dragon without a head. And though Feng Xiao might be the strongest martial artist in the land, without Cui Buqu's crafty plots and astute observations, what could he achieve?

Yuxiu hated these two for repeatedly foiling the Thirteen Floors' plans, and he hated Feng Xiao even more for taking his eye. Now that he was certain Feng Xiao had feigned his loyalty and was here to make trouble, he showed no mercy. Every move was meant to kill—if he had his way, he would put Feng Xiao in his grave today.

Feng Xiao was in no mood to entertain him. Cui Buqu couldn't have woken up on his own so quickly, yet he was missing. The only possibility was that someone had taken him—and wherever they were going, no good fate awaited Cui Buqu.

Yuxiu could sense Feng Xiao was anxious to extricate himself from the fight, but he didn't understand why.

Everything he understood about their relationship was from a time before they'd left the capital. As far as he knew, the Jiejian and Zuoyue Bureaus served their own interests and had their own plans. Any cooperation between them was a short-term affair—there were no deep ties there. Seeing Feng Xiao in a hurry to find Cui Buqu, Yuxiu could only surmise that Cui Buqu was in possession of something important.

Once the thought sparked, it blazed through his mind, and he rushed off in pursuit of Feng Xiao. They flew through one secret passage after another. Every time Feng Xiao sped up in an attempt to throw Yuxiu off his trail, Yuxiu swiftly caught up. Evading him was impossible in such a narrow passage.

Feng Xiao soon wearied of playing chase. He changed direction and raced toward the exit.

By now, the cave was in chaos. Some desperately sought a way out, while others looked for a safe place to hide from the fire. No one paid Feng Xiao and the other directors any mind. Fan Yun and Yuan Sansi were nowhere to be found.

Feng Xiao was beginning to have a sneaking suspicion that this chaos had something to do with the sickly Cui Buqu. But the man in question was gravely injured and could scarcely stand. How could he have the wherewithal to unleash such havoc on the enemy?

After Yuxiu had fled from Feng Xiao in the Western Khaganate, he'd been personally treated by the leader of the Thirteen Floors. The pavilion leader had even given Yuxiu a powerful and deadly hidden weapon, the needle Liaoyan Shuipo. It was colorless, nearly formless, and light as a feather. But when stimulated with internal energy, it could pierce an opponent's true qi and penetrate their acupoints. By melding into the enemy's body and disrupting their meridians, it would act as a poison, plunging them into terrible agony.

Yuxiu had made several previous attacks with Liaoyan Shuipo, but Feng Xiao had slyly evaded them all—until now. Feng Xiao, mere inches ahead, slowed as rocks came tumbling down into his path. Yuxiu brought his saber up in a sharp slash. Though a flick of Feng Xiao's sleeve and a

palm blast dispersed Yuxiu's saber qi, Yuxiu was undeterred: He snapped his fingers, and spears of wind pierced Feng Xiao's shoulder. Feng Xiao swayed in place as he realized something was wrong.

But Yuxiu gave him no chance to breathe. He crooked his fingers, infusing them with internal energy as he lunged forward and clawed at Feng Xiao's head. Before his fingers pierced flesh, Feng Xiao vanished into thin air—Yuxiu had missed.

It was surely some trick; Feng Xiao must have darted behind the boulder in front of him. Yuxiu rushed forward, but there was nothing there. Instead, he found himself surrounded by a thick mist. The light of a scant few night pearls seemed to hover in the distance, floating and warped. It was as if that one step had brought him into a different world entirely.

Blast, thought Yuxiu. He'd fallen into a trap: Feng Xiao had lured him into the Ursa Major Twin Jade Array.

He'd listened as Fan Yun explained the workings of this array before, and under normal circumstances, he knew how to leave it. But now, many stones had shaken loose from the walls, and the crash of rolling waves filled his ears, as if rain were pouring down directly overhead. It felt nothing like the array he'd previously passed through.

Gusts of chill air surged around him, slicing past his clothes like arrows of ice. He evaded them, narrowly avoiding being sliced to ribbons. Yuxiu advanced carefully, wary of the quicksand traps he knew lay ahead. A single misstep would see him captive within the sand, its demonic hands yearning to drag its victims into the abyss.

Fan Yun had once said this array could mutate endlessly. Yuxiu had thought it an exaggeration at the time. Only now did he truly appreciate Fan Yun's abilities, and why the pavilion leader valued him so highly. For a sufficiently skilled user of this array, trapping a martial expert or two was nothing—even if hundreds of imperial guards stormed in, this labyrinth would ensure they'd never see the light of day again.

The metallic clash of swords rang in his ears. Yuxiu couldn't tell if they were sounds from a real battle or an illusion born of the array. He pressed his back to the stone wall and fell still, his handsome face darkening with anger. After a moment, his lips twisted in a sneer.

Liaoyan Shuipo had found its target; Feng Xiao would feel its effects very soon. Yuxiu was sure to find him before he escaped the array. Their next encounter would spell the death of the chief of the Jiejian Bureau.

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When Cui Buqu awoke, he didn’t know his sleep acupoint had been struck, nor that someone had come to unseal it. He groped around and found something beside his bed.

A jar of lamp oil.

It was a trifle that could turn small fires into raging infernos. He was certain it hadn’t been in his room earlier. The Thirteen Floors of Yunhai were champing at the bit to torment him. Why would they give him lamp oil? If this unexpected gift wasn’t from Feng Xiao, it had to be from Fan Yun.

He’d parted ways with Fan Yun years ago. They had their own places to be, their own things to do; they’d never so much as exchanged a single letter. But his image of Fan-xiansheng was not as someone easily enticed to join a revolt. The Thirteen Floors of Yunhai might attract more volatile types like Yuxiu and Yuan Sansi, but that didn’t mean they could impress Fan Yun. That Fan Yun himself had hinted so several times was as good as proof.

Cui Buqu slowly sat up. After fumbling around for a while, he found several more items of interest: A dagger—the same one Feng Xiao had stabbed him with—as well as the fire starters Cui Buqu had been carrying, which hadn’t been confiscated. A set of maid’s clothing was folded beside them. Even if Feng Xiao had left them to Cui Buqu for his protection, Fan Yun was a careful man. He would have noticed.

From all Cui Buqu’s observations, the pavilion leader of the Thirteen Floors of Yunhai was no fool. Fan Yun must have taken great pains to join and done much to earn the pavilion leader’s trust in order to become his advisor and gain control over the organization’s grand designs.

Yet now, Fan Yun was assisting Cui Buqu in wreaking havoc. He'd even left him a jar of lamp oil, as if afraid Cui Buqu couldn't make enough trouble on his own. Regardless of where Fan Yun's true intentions lay, of course Cui Buqu would put it to good use.

The night pearls served as the main source of light in the cave. There was only one place that used fire, and that was the kitchen. He saw at once what Fan Yun wished him to do. In this case, he didn't mind being used—inciting chaos was just what Cui Buqu wanted. He'd lend Fan Yun a hand, despite the risk. There was no other chance of escape.

Cui Buqu coughed, and the salty-sweet tang of blood rose in his throat. His broken-down body was no good for these sorts of capers—but if he enjoyed keeping out of trouble, he wouldn't be Cui Buqu.

He took the dagger and the lamp oil. His gaze landed on the set of maid's clothing, and his mouth twitched.

Most of the guards carried sabers. He might have passed himself off as one on a normal day, but right now his feet were unsteady and his limbs weak. The maid disguise would indeed be more convincing.

Chapter 121

LIANG FENG was a member of the Thirteen Floors of Yunhai, a simple and ordinary guard. He'd been a disciple from a small sect in Laoling until their leader was killed by Yuan Sansi. All his shixiong who'd fought had died as well, and Liang Feng and the other remaining disciples had surrendered to Yuan Sansi, joining the Thirteen Floors as underlings.

The Thirteen Floors of Yunhai were wealthy and treated them well enough. To prevent Liang Feng and his sect siblings from conspiring together, however, they had separated them. Liang Feng was placed in the Fourth Floor, under the command of Yuan Sansi. He had traveled from Laoling to Mount Tiannan, and had been guarding this cave ever since.

The guards here almost never left the caves, and were permitted down the mountain with even less frequency. Though they were generously compensated with salary, food, and clothing, what use was money when one lived secluded on a mountain year-round with hardly a glimpse of the sun?

What was more, the Thirteen Floors had guaranteed their loyalty with poison. He and his fellow guards had all been dosed; without the antidote, which they received once a month, they couldn't run far. Even if they escaped, the most they could do was delay the effects of the poison.

On one occasion, two discontented guards had planned to flee in the dead of night and urged Liang Feng to join them. But Liang Feng was a timid man; he ultimately refused. In the end, his fears had borne out: When the two deserters were captured several days later, their bodies had turned black—a horrific sight. Liang Feng had been terrified out of his wits; he no longer had any doubts as to whether the poison was real.

The cave was spacious, but there was nothing to do beyond guarding it. With time, his days began to blur. He could no longer remember what month or day it was; all he could do was stand numbly on guard, hour after hour.

Today was no different. Though big names had arrived one after another, including many famous figures and first-class masters from the jianghu, they had nothing to do with Liang Feng. As for the Zuoyue and Jiejian Bureaus, he had no idea what they were. He only knew to obey his orders and stand at his post outside the kitchen.

At this hour, there was no one working inside. Liang Feng yawned and struggled to stay awake, leaning against the stone wall. He blinked as a figure walked toward him out of the gloom.

At first he took her for a kitchen maid, but he soon realized this wasn't so. The girl was tall and walked slowly, her head lowered. She looked ill, and when she came close, he caught a faint whiff of medicine.

"Halt," called Liang Feng without any real wariness. The saber at his waist remained sheathed. "Who are you?"

"I'm one of Feng-niangzi's maids, sir. She isn't feeling well, and she asked me to boil some water for her." Her voice was low and hoarse, her long hair spilling over her shoulders and hiding her ears. Liang Feng couldn't get a clear view of her in the low light; he could only sense the meek submissiveness she was giving off in waves.

"We can't light the stove until it's time to cook," he said automatically.

"But Feng-niangzi is demanding it. If I don't bring her hot water, she's sure to punish me," the maid pleaded. She extracted a silver hairpin from her hair and pressed it into Liang Feng's hand. "Please, sir! Do me this favor."

Liang Feng knew something about Feng-niangzi, and had once had the good fortune of glimpsing her. He'd never seen anyone so gorgeous in his life—her beauty was beyond what he could put into words. Whether she was the type to punish her maids harshly, he didn't know, but money was useless here. He pushed the hairpin back toward the maid. "It's orders from above. Go complain to them!"

Only the fact that he was speaking to a woman, and that it'd been a long time since he'd last conversed with anyone at all, kept him from snapping in irritation.

"Are you from Laoling, sir?" the maid asked unexpectedly.

“How did you know?” Liang Feng knew his Chinese was accented with the dialect of his hometown.

“I’m from Laoling as well. I came here with Feng-niangzi.” The maid immediately switched into his native dialect.

How long had it been since he’d last heard the familiar tones of his home? And now here he was, hearing it from a stranger. Liang Feng was momentarily stunned, overcome with the urge to cry.

After exchanging a few pleasantries, things grew much warmer between them. He learned that the maid had angered Feng-niangzi and been sent to fetch water after a whipping. Liang Feng felt a pang of sympathy.

“How about this,” he said, relenting. “Go boil some water, and I’ll keep an eye out for you. No one will be around for a while anyway. But don’t dawdle!”

The maid thanked him over and over, then ducked inside, one hand trailing along the wall for support. After a quarter of an hour, she struggled back out with a pail of water. The girl staggered a few steps and collapsed beside Liang Feng, almost spilling the water she’d taken such pains to boil.

As Liang Feng helped her up, she pleaded tearfully, “May I trouble the gentleman to take the water to Feng-niangzi? I promise I’ll put in a good word for you with my lady. I’ll ask her to bring you along when she leaves.”

At this, Liang Feng wavered. He knew Feng-niangzi and the other big shots were here for a meeting and would leave in a few days. Liang Feng was a nobody—if Feng-niangzi asked the steward for him, the steward would have no reason to refuse. He could be free of this suffocating, lightless place.

“When you take the water to her,” the maid urged, “make sure to say a few words for yourself! That way, Feng-niangzi will remember you when I praise you to her later!”

Liang Feng had previously only felt sympathetic; now he genuinely wished to help. He took the pail. “You can rest here for a while. Wait for me to come back.”

The poor man had no idea as he set off down the corridor that behind him, the maid was smiling slightly as she watched his retreating back. Nor did he know that this maid didn't speak only Laoling's dialect—she could speak a few sentences in any dialect he could think of. And he certainly had no idea that his moment of kindness would indeed ultimately lead to his own escape.

The only thing that wasn't an act was Cui Buqu's feebleness. Fortunately, Fan Yun and Feng Xiao had treated his wounds, and the internal energy they'd channeled into him had worked its magic. Even getting out of bed would have been difficult otherwise, let alone staggering along with only the wall for support.

Once Liang Feng was out of sight, Cui Buqu took a moment to catch his breath before slowly getting to his feet. He hobbled into the kitchen, splashed lamp oil on everything, and tossed a torch onto the waiting stack of firewood.

Flames roared up.

Cui Buqu dashed out of the kitchen, pouring a trail of lamp oil as he went. The fire leapt ravenously after him. The blaze soon grew beyond the kitchen, consuming everything in its path. There was no water nearby; once the fire grew large enough, dousing it was a fool's dream.

The guards nearby smelled the smoke almost immediately. Finding the fire already out of control, they turned and ran toward safety. Cui Buqu slipped inconspicuously into the panicking crowd. The night pearls' glow was faint, and the air was thick with smoke. No one noticed anything strange about the tall maid in their midst as they fled in all directions—just as he'd expected.

Feng Xiao had mentioned the pavilion leader was arriving today for an important discussion with his directors. Once he caught wind of the chaos here, he'd surely rush over to stabilize the situation. If Cui Buqu was quick, he could take advantage of the commotion and leave to look for the Jiejian Bureau forces, then rush back and capture all the leaders of the Thirteen Floors in one fell swoop.

He was walking a bit too fast. Pain lanced through his chest again, and the sheer agony forced him to stoop. His hair came free and scattered down his back, long and disheveled.

The cave was chilly, but sweat trickled down his forehead. Cui Buqu had pushed himself too hard; his injury was flaring up again. Soon his neck and back were likewise drenched, damp strands of hair clinging to the nape of his neck. He looked positively wretched.

The pain flooding him made him yearn to pass out, but his dwindling awareness forbade it. Vision blurring, he held the stone wall in a crushing grip, using the sting in his fingertips to clear his mind.

Feng Xiao.…

The name rose unbidden. Cui Buqu slumped against the stone wall in a daze, unable to go on. He could only wait for the pain to pass. As the agony reached its peak, his thoughts shattered into sharp fragments. He couldn't think. All that leapt to mind was a handsome face, willful and flamboyant. He slowly put it together with the name—yes, Feng Xiao was probably here as well. But he was crafty and adapted with ease to unfavorable circumstances. Cui Buqu needn't worry about him.

Cui Buqu, on the other hand, had to leave as soon as possible. If he fell into the enemy's hands now, everything he'd done would be in vain.

At this thought, he reluctantly straightened up again. Only then did he realize he was drenched in sweat. Even his palms were soaked, leaving a dark smear on the stone wall.

The flareup had sapped him of strength. His head felt fuzzy, his feet shuffling forward unsteadily, as though he was stepping on clouds. He squeezed his eyes shut as he waited for the discomfort to pass. In his distress, he entirely failed to realize that someone had come up behind him.

Yet even if he'd turned around, he couldn't have escaped. This person moved like lightning—in the blink of an eye, he was inches away from Cui Buqu. His hand fell lightly on Cui Buqu's shoulder, and Cui Buqu turned despite himself.

"It really is you." There was a sinister edge to Yuan Sansi's voice. "Were you responsible for this fire too?"

Cui Buqu knew without looking that five finger-shaped bruises had printed themselves into his shoulder. His muscles and bones were probably damaged from Yuan Sansi's grip. But compared to the agony burning like

fire in his chest, this newly inflicted injury was nothing. On the contrary, the sharpness of the pain pulled some of his focus back from the haze.

"Yuan Sansi. Your childhood sweetheart, Lady Yu. The Yu family who were so kind to you. Even your position as commandery governor of Boling. None of these things hold any value for you." Cui Buqu coughed a few times, then rasped, "The only thing you care about is the Thirteen Floors of Yunhai. Am I right?"

"You are," said Yuan Sansi. "I knew someone like you would understand me best. Romantic passions only hinder us: To give your heart to someone else is to lose yourself; you become incapable of moving forward. And the position of commandery governor is only a temporary cover, no more. Don't worry, I won't kill you today. In honor of the years I shared with your mother, I'll take you to see the pavilion leader. He can decide how to deal with you."

Despite his gentle words, he grabbed Cui Buqu's collar and wrenched him forward, with no more care than if he was a mere object.

Cui Buqu staggered along in his grip. His wound seemed to have reopened, and the agony was unbearable. Cui Buqu never begged for mercy or screamed in pain, but even he couldn't hold back a low moan.

Yuan Sansi sneered. He reached out with his free hand and grabbed Cui Buqu's chin; yanking his face up, he scrutinized it carefully. "The pavilion leader is a virtuous man. He's never lusted after women, nor does he ever show undue interest in his enemies. And then there's Feng Xiao—he was willing to risk himself to save you. When I look closely at your face, you really do resemble your mother…"

Mind a blur, Cui Buqu listened hazily as Yuan Sansi spoke. It took a moment for those words—*he was even willing to risk himself to save you*—to register. Confusion creased his brow, as if he was trying very hard to understand.

Yuan Sansi abruptly released him; without his support, Cui Buqu slumped to the ground. "What are you doing?!" Yuan Sansi's angry shout sounded in Cui Buqu's ears as he exchanged blows with someone new. Their flying figures entwined in the dim light, palms interweaving. True qi exploded outward, the shockwaves lashing the nearby Cui Buqu.

Cui Buqu fumbled a porcelain bottle from his lapels. Feng Xiao had taken this bottle from him, yet it'd somehow reappeared in his pockets. He tipped out several pills and swallowed them without a closer look. Now he was certain it was Fan Yun who'd removed the guards at his door, as well as the people who should have been in the passage leading to the kitchen. He'd wanted this fire.

"Fan Yun! Have you betrayed the pavilion leader?!" Yuan Sansi cried in fury. He assumed Fan Yun was sentimental about his disciple and had intervened to save him. But Fan Yun's every move was made with killing intent.

Cui Buqu heard Fan Yun shouting at him: "Feng Xiao and Yuxiu are both looking for you. They probably fell into the Ursa Major Twin Jade Array!"

The array was full of traps, and martial arts lost their potency within its confines. If Yuxiu was more familiar with the array than Feng Xiao, the deputy chief would be in great danger.

Perhaps the pills had some effect; Cui Buqu found his chest wasn't quite as painful as it had been. At Fan Yun's words, he panted and managed to stand. Then he began stumbling and staggering toward the exit.

Chapter 122

CUI BUQU had seen Feng Xiao at his most wretched.

Back when Feng Xiao had insisted on leaving Liugong City to save Pei Jingzhe, Cui Buqu had been suffering the effects of incense of helplessness and resigned himself to being dragged along. Despite knowing they were walking into a trap, they had rushed to the meeting location and —as expected—landed in hot water. They'd had no choice but to take temporary shelter in a cave and wait for reinforcements. Even so, Cui Buqu hadn't thought Feng Xiao fully at the end of his rope, and certainly not primed for slaughter. If Fo'er had returned for a match, it would have been hard to pick a winner.

Feng Xiao was a narcissist, obsessed with himself; he'd never make his own life difficult. Though he often took pleasure in annoying Cui Buqu and from time to time made a show of affection, Cui Buqu had always viewed their relationship as a collaboration between rivals. When they worked together, it was with a strict goal in mind. If Feng Xiao mocked him or threw him to the wolves, Cui Buqu had no qualms about returning the favor. And when they did cooperate, no further words were needed between them. They worked quickly and decisively.

When Feng Xiao had betrayed him, Cui Buqu had calmly computed his gains and losses. When Feng Xiao stopped Yuxiu and stabbed Cui Buqu himself, Cui Buqu hadn't been upset in the slightest. He'd known it was their only option. Afterward, he'd serenely agreed with Feng Xiao's claim that his hand had been forced.

Until that moment, Cui Buqu had been solely focused on escaping. He knew Feng Xiao would never put himself in danger. But this time, he was wrong—not only had Feng Xiao failed to leave, he'd returned to look for him. Why would he do that? Feng Xiao had absolutely no reason to come back.

Yet what Cui Buqu was most wrong about was himself.

He could have ignored Fan Yun's words and simply left. He'd have to pass through the Ursa Major Twin Jade Array, but since Fan Yun was the creator, Cui Buqu was confident he knew it well enough to traverse it without running into either Feng Xiao or Yuxiu.

Outside, the Jiejian Bureau was waiting to help them. If he extricated himself and ordered them to watch the cave entrance, even if they failed to capture the powerful fighters like Yuxiu and Yuan Sansi, they'd at the very least sweep up the stewards and guards. Perhaps they'd even manage to snag Lin Yong or Ning Shewo. They would be a massive step closer to taking down the Thirteen Floors of Yunhai.

Conversely, if he went to look for Feng Xiao now, and Yuxiu managed to find him first, Cui Buqu would be in grave danger.

He made his way to the entrance of the array in stops and starts, thoughts racing like a spinning carousel. All of them were cold and rational, urging him not to worry about Deputy Chief Feng—he should leave first and think later. If he were to wander the array, even a costly victory might be too much to ask of his ailing body. He would likely crumple before he found Feng Xiao, even without the aid of Yuxiu.

What insane notion had gotten into that fool's head this time? Why would he return to look for Cui Buqu?

Cui Buqu sighed. He could feel his own searing breaths. When he touched his forehead, his palm seemed to burn with alarming heat. He no longer had the energy to curse Feng Xiao aloud, so he cursed him over and over in his mind. His legs felt as if they were tied to a millstone, and a chilly breeze whipped his face and scattered the scorching heat of his breath. He shivered.

Finally he stood on the edge of the array. Another step and he'd enter it. If he wanted to escape, he should go around to the other side so he could pass through safely.

Cui Buqu hesitated just a moment, then stepped forward.

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Feng Xiao, it seemed, had underestimated Fan Yun.

After getting a general summary of the array from Cui Buqu, he'd thought he could trap Yuxiu. Instead, things had spiraled out of control. Yuxiu wasn't the only one trapped—Feng Xiao was as well.

There shouldn't have been any light in the array, yet the occasional flame leapt into the sky, and the faint glow of fireflies flickered into existence. If he was rash enough to approach them, he was guaranteed to fall into a trap. He'd already had several close calls. The first time, the array had almost scrambled his mind; the next, he'd nearly been discovered by Yuxiu. Each was searching for the other as they sought a path out of the array, yet they were also trying to avoid being ambushed by their adversary. They crept forward inch by inch, yet seemed only to circle back to the same spot over and over again. Even Feng Xiao was beginning to feel fatigued.

Yuxiu's hidden weapon was taking effect, suppressing Feng Xiao's internal energy. Feng Xiao's energy was plentiful, but it wasn't infinite. He had to keep it circulating to fend off the cold of the array while staying on guard against Yuxiu. At the same time, he was keeping an eye on the needle inside his body. If he remained trapped like this, a single fate awaited him.

It was cold consolation that, as far as he knew, Yuxiu wasn't doing much better. Feng Xiao already injured the monk in their previous battle. Unless Yuxiu escaped the array, it would eventually wear him down, and he'd perish.

Feng Xiao had no desire to die with him.

The path forked ahead, separated by three boulders. He was almost certain he'd seen this exact place not long ago. Frustrated, Feng Xiao realized he was going in circles. He'd taken the left path last time, so this time he took the right. The further he walked, the colder the air became. A faint glow emanated from deep within the fog.

Light was more likely to mark a trap than an exit. Feng Xiao felt no relief; instead, he slowed his pace.

Without warning, a group of people rushed toward him through the thick and icy fog. At the front was Ming Yue, the third chief of the Jiejian Bureau. When he caught sight of Feng Xiao, his honest face lit up with joy.

“Erlang!” He strode over with his men. “I’ve finally found you. You left such vague messages! If I hadn’t met Cui Buqu, I would never have spotted the entrance to this place!”

Feng Xiao blinked. “Cui Buqu got out?” he asked slowly.

“Yes! He said you were still inside and asked me to bring reinforcements! Thank goodness we found you! Let’s go; we should leave first and talk later!”

Ming Yue stretched out a hand to pull him over, but Feng Xiao flinched back. Ming Yue’s hand closed on nothing. He looked at Feng Xiao in confusion.

“Do you know the way out?” asked Feng Xiao.

Light glinted in Ming Yue’s eyes. “I do. Cui Buqu showed me!”

Feng Xiao’s lip curled. He struck at Ming Yue without another word.

“What are you doing?!” Ming Yue was stunned. He couldn’t avoid Feng Xiao’s palm brimming with internal energy and took the blow head-on. There was a *bang* like a clap of thunder, and the wind from the strike scattered the surrounding fog. Ming Yue and his men crumbled into a fine powder.

Feng Xiao snorted coldly.

The Jiejian Bureau had always acted on his orders. Ming Yue wasn’t the type to overstep his authority: If Feng Xiao had yet to make his decision, Ming Yue wouldn’t push him. On top of that, this was a terribly complex array. Feng Xiao refused to believe Ming Yue could learn its solution with just a few words from Cui Buqu. It could only be another illusion.

He’d already encountered several such illusions since entering. They blurred the boundaries between time and space, leaving Feng Xiao unable to tell how long he’d been trapped. He could neither see nor touch the enemy. Never before had he been in such a predicament—yet he was the one who’d willingly stepped into the array.

Feng Xiao was at the end of his patience. At this point, he’d prefer to run into Yuxiu and Yuan Sansi. Two against one would still have been better than drifting about in the mist like this, wandering in endless loops.

At the thought, he sensed someone approaching him from behind. They were still some distance away, perhaps several boulders back. But Feng Xiao noticed them immediately. Those footsteps were too heavy to be Yuxiu's.

Another illusion?

Feng Xiao stood motionless, quietly waiting for the newcomer to approach. His hands flexed within his sleeves, ready to kill at a moment's notice.

The smudge of a figure appeared from behind the boulder, moving toward him through the fog. Whoever it was appeared to be holding an orb of glowing green, most likely a night pearl. But that figure, those clothes… They were in complete contradiction. Feng Xiao narrowed his eyes, watching the figure struggle forward, holding onto the stones for support. At last they stopped a short distance from him, as if waiting for him to come meet them.

Feng Xiao sneered and obliged. A slight shift of his feet, and he was right before them, striking out with his palm.

The strike was largely a feint, with little internal energy behind it. An illusion of condensed mist would dissipate the moment his hand connected. But this time, his palm met a warm body. The newcomer quaked and staggered back into the boulder behind them, spitting out a mouthful of blood.

As warm blood splashed over the back of his hand, doubt finally surfaced on Feng Xiao's face. "It's you?"

Hoping to confirm his guess, he stepped forward and caught the body —it was solid. He grabbed the person's face for a closer look. A hint of surprised joy colored his voice. "It's really you!"

Chapter 123

ONLY WHEN Cui Buqu's warm body was in Feng Xiao's embrace did Feng Xiao truly believe it was him.

Then he remembered he'd struck him. Cui Buqu suffered from all sorts of ailments at the best of times, and he'd been stabbed in the chest not long ago. Though his organs, muscles, and bones were unharmed, he'd lost a large quantity of blood, and his vitality was greatly affected. In his current state, he'd never live long enough to die of old age. Despite Feng Xiao's natural belligerence, he was forced to admit that most of Cui Buqu's injuries were more or less his fault.

"Are you all right?" The moment it was out, he realized it was a stupid thing to ask. Even so, he couldn't stop himself from voicing another foolish question: "Why did you come into the array?"

He already knew the answer and was even secretly pleased about it, yet he still wanted to hear it from Cui Buqu's own mouth. Feng Xiao mused that he'd never acted so brainless before. His soul seemed to have split into two—one half watched his idiocy coolly from the sidelines, while the other couldn't stop the words from tumbling out.

He grabbed Cui Buqu's wrist and channeled internal energy into him. Cui Buqu finally shifted and spoke, his voice so hoarse it was nearly inaudible. "Don't ask stupid questions."

He was already here. What was the point of asking if he was all right, or why he'd come? It was a waste of time, an indisputably idiotic thing to say.

Deputy Chief Feng was never happy to lose a spat; normally he'd have already fired back a teasing retort. Cui Buqu had been ready to be interrogated over why he'd overestimated his abilities and gone running into the thick of battle to rescue him. But to his surprise, Feng Xiao answered with a low hum and said nothing more.

The arms around Cui Buqu tightened as internal energy continued to pour into his body in an almost reckless flood. Cui Buqu was a little

disturbed. Privately, he wondered if Feng-er had suffered brain damage from wandering in the array too long. No matter how abundant his internal energy, he couldn't sustain this level of output.

Cui Buqu's chilled body slowly thawed in Feng Xiao's arms. The pain in his shoulder from Feng Xiao's palm strike faded as well. It was so comfortable he didn't want to move, yet he struggled to grab Feng Xiao's wrists. "That's enough. Let's get out of here."

Feng Xiao ignored him. Only when he was satisfied that he'd given enough energy did he stop. "Your teacher's array seems a bit more complex than what you described."

"Obviously. He's the original designer; it's hardly surprising it's evolved over the years." Cui Buqu coughed twice. The congestion in his throat seemed to have eased a little—by sheer coincidence, Feng Xiao's palm strike must have cleared the blood pooling in his chest. "Where is Yuxiu?"

"He's in the array too, and equally confounded I imagine. If you can hold on a little longer, I want to finish him off before we leave."

Every additional moment Cui Buqu spent in the array would do him harm. Most people would leave as quickly as possible after finding the person they were seeking. But Cui Buqu nodded without protest.

The feeling of being so helplessly held in another person's embrace was not one he liked; he was unused to it. He steadied himself within Feng Xiao's arms and stood up straight, then pushed Feng Xiao away.

Feng Xiao grabbed his wrist. "You came here to look for me, right?" Feng Xiao's tone was a little strange, neither teasing nor sarcastic.

Unable to read him, Cui Buqu frowned. "No," he said tartly, then shook off Feng Xiao's grip. But he heard Feng-er chuckle, as if amused by the insincerity of his answer.

Cui Buqu was baffled. He looked at Feng Xiao like he was a fool, then turned around and began walking.

True to its name, the Ursa Major Twin Jade Array contained two arrays, one large and one small, with the latter nestled within the former. With Cui Buqu as their guide, they walked toward the heart of the array as

freezing winds wailed and sent powerful gusts funneling between the boulders. They were chilled to the bone, yet they could see lights and shadows dancing before them like flickering mirages. The clang of armor and weapons rang endlessly in their ears, confusing their senses. Even a powerful martial artist like Feng Xiao felt his heart pound and his vision swim. Yet following Cui Buqu, they avoided the sinister winds and never stepped into another trap. Still, he didn't know the array inside out. He walked a few paces then stopped, every step seemingly taken only after great thought.

As they reached the edge of the stone forest, a bright light shone before them—it seemed the exit was in sight. Outside the cave, rain fell in a drizzling curtain, and in the sliver of sky above, they could make out a dense shroud of dark clouds. To anyone who'd been trapped in the array, this dreary scene meant freedom.

This so-called exit was almost guaranteed to be a trap. Yet after a brief hesitation, Cui Buqu stepped through it.

Cold air brimming with murderous intent rushed toward him from both sides. A hand yanked his collar just in time, sending him staggering backward as several steel arrows missed him by a hair's breadth. The arrowheads clanged as they collided.

Feng Xiao tossed Cui Buqu behind him one-handed, the other reaching for his zither strings. Buzzing with true qi, the strings pulled taut in midair and blocked the next wave of ferocious arrows. It was just enough. Feng Xiao and Cui Buqu spun aside, and the iron arrows flew impotently forward to clatter on the ground.

"Fan Yun, that old bastard," Feng Xiao said in displeasure. "He had bad intentions from the start!"

"He wants to use us to vanquish the Thirteen Floors. If we die in the process, he'll have killed two birds with one stone." Cui Buqu's expression was placid; he wasn't remotely surprised. "Even if this isn't the real exit, we're not far. Let's find it and wait there. If Yuxiu wants to leave, he'll have to pass through."

With that, he pushed Feng Xiao away—yet to his surprise, Feng Xiao offered no resistance. He stepped back and slumped against a boulder, then slowly sat down. Cui Buqu looked at him, confused.

Feng Xiao sighed. “I can’t walk any farther. Let’s rest a bit. Why push ourselves? Maybe Yuxiu sat down to have a snack too.”

Cui Buqu’s first thought was that Feng Xiao was up to some new mischief. Still, he crouched down and touched his forehead. No fever.

Feng Xiao grabbed his hand. “Stop feeling me up, Daoist Master Cui,” he drawled.

The corners of Cui Buqu’s mouth twitched as he tried to gently yank his hand back and failed. “Now you’re the one feeling me up.”

“How many times were you going to cop a feel if I hadn’t grabbed your hand?” asked Feng Xiao. “Don’t tell me you wouldn’t have touched me again. There are so many who lust after my venerable self; how could I fail to see your ulterior motives? If you’ve taken a fancy to me, just say so. I might even consider accepting your feelings.”

What the hell was he on about now?

Cui Buqu was used to the casual vulgarities that spilled out whenever Feng-er ran his mouth, but it wasn’t like him to fool around at such a critical moment. A thought occurred to him. “Are you injured?”

“Nonsense.” Feng Xiao spoke in the same lazy tone. “How could I be, unparalleled martial artist that I am? Don’t think you can take advantage of me just because it’s dark in here. I won’t let you have your way.”

He yanked the crouching Cui Buqu toward him and grabbed the back of his head to keep him from standing. A palm blast from behind blew past Cui Buqu. It’d narrowly missed him, thanks to Feng Xiao.

Foiled, Yuxiu had no choice but to step out from his hiding place and face Feng Xiao head-on. Cui Buqu was shoved aside as Feng Xiao and Yuxiu fell straight into battle.

Yuxiu must have been there for some time, spying on them and waiting for an opportunity to strike. He’d been out for blood from the moment he heard Cui Buqu say they weren’t far from the exit. His presence hadn’t escaped Feng Xiao’s notice; he’d merely been waiting for Yuxiu to show his face.

True qi rose in towering waves between the two combatants, answering the yin energy within the array like a war trumpet and drawing in

the cold, dark air all around them. Yuxiu and Feng Xiao were unaffected, protected by their internal energy, but Cui Buqu felt a freezing wind buffet his face. The air streamed in through his nose, and a tightness seized his chest. He instantly became nauseous and started coughing with discomfort.

The sound of his wheezing seemed to remind Yuxiu of something. “Deputy Chief Feng,” he sneered. “Did you not discover the needle inside your body?”

He wove through the fog, as quick as a shadow melding into the gray mists. As he circled, he moved with the flow of yin energy, seeking out his chance to attack. He obviously hadn’t wasted his time while trapped but had discovered some of the rules of the Twin Jade Array.

Yuxiu’s words confirmed Cui Buqu’s guess. His heart sank, and he strained to make out Feng Xiao’s figure within the fog. His attacks remained fierce and decisive. But the more fierce and decisive he was, the more certain Cui Buqu felt that something was wrong. It was Feng Xiao’s style to nettle his opponents—he never let up until they were hopping with rage. Yet now he was silent. Perhaps Yuxiu hadn’t noticed, but Cui Buqu saw it instantly—Feng Xiao had no energy to spare for chatter.

What can I do? Cui Buqu thought. He looked around, frowning.

Yuxiu remained on the defensive, patiently parrying Feng Xiao’s strikes. He was in no hurry to end this. Feng Xiao’s approach appeared to be the opposite: The winds from his palm strikes were more cutting than the yin-infused gales within the array. His every move brimmed with bloodlust as he flashed between forms, too quick to see. Yuxiu dodged an attack to his front, only for Feng Xiao to vanish into thin air. A moment later he reappeared at Yuxiu’s side and slammed a palm toward his chest, shattering the protective barrier of true qi around him.

Yuxiu spat out a mouthful of blood, his eyes wide with alarm. But Feng Xiao didn’t take the chance to press him. Instead, he paused.

At once, Yuxiu understood. Rather than fleeing to nurse his injury, he stepped forward, laughing. A small dagger shot from his billowing sleeves, and he grasped the hilt. Focusing all his energy into the blade, he slashed at Feng Xiao’s head.

A fight between master martial artists never lasted long. The first glimpse of the enemy's weakness spelled life or death. A moment ago Yuxiu had been fearful; now, he advanced full of confidence, unwilling to retreat. The tables had turned in a split second. He was sure of his judgment and grateful to the pavilion leader. If not for his gift of the needle, Yuxiu might never have gained the upper hand over Feng Xiao.

True qi surged into the blade. At that moment, even the yin-infused winds shied away from its edge. One slash cleaved them in two, and they wrapped around the dagger as it whistled toward Feng Xiao.

Feng Xiao leapt back, but his movements were slower than before. If the blade connected, it might not behead him, but it would slice his chest open at the least. Wherever it fell, it would put him half in his grave.

But the blade whizzed past. Feng Xiao's figure vanished into the mists as the dagger struck stone instead of flesh. The blade's qi splashed out on either side, shattering the floor of the tunnel with a resounding rumble—yet Feng Xiao was nowhere in sight.

Yuxiu stood stunned. He swept his furious gaze to the side. Sure enough, Cui Buqu had disappeared as well.

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Cui Buqu dragged Feng Xiao through the array, swerving and dodging far too nimbly for an ailing, injured man. In contrast, Feng Xiao staggered as he walked, then went limp without warning. He slumped against Cui Buqu, almost knocking them both to the ground.

"I need to remove the needle first. I can't move even half my body anymore," Feng Xiao said through gritted teeth.

He'd never imagined Yuxiu's hidden weapon was so powerful; he'd thought he could suppress it until they escaped. But the moment he'd drawn on his internal energy during the fight, the silver needle had begun to weave through his body with his qi, and he'd almost collapsed on the spot.

Cui Buqu didn't say much either. He tugged Feng Xiao over to the stone wall and forced him to sit. "I used some of the stones to mimic the

Twin Jade Array and made a smaller array, so now it's a Triple Jade Array. But a little trick like that won't buy us much time. Yuxiu will be able to break out with brute force. Hurry up!" he urged.

"You, help me." Feng Xiao grabbed Cui Buqu's shoulder and pulled him down, little by little, to sit beside him. He balled his other hand into a loose fist. "Press on my Guanyuan acupoint. Use moderate force."

The Guanyuan acupoint lay three inches below the navel. Cui Buqu had some medical knowledge, but he lacked practical experience. He felt his way toward Feng Xiao's navel and carefully measured out a distance of three inches. Feng Xiao couldn't take his dallying—he grabbed Cui Buqu's hand and tugged it downward. "Right here. Press on it with one hand and don't let go. Move your other hand up along the Renmai meridian, just above it. Don't stop until I say so!"

Cui Buqu didn't think twice. He quietly did as he was told.

With Cui Buqu closing off the Ren meridian for him and stopping the needle from moving around, Feng Xiao gathered his energy to expel it from his body. But it was as if the needle realized it was under threat. It buzzed restlessly and tried to flee into the blood pumping through his veins. Feng Xiao's face paled. He pursed his lips and squeezed his eyes shut, his usual teasing smile replaced with cold severity.

Cui Buqu's eyes were trained on Feng Xiao, watching for any change in his expression. In a sense, he and Feng Xiao were birds of a feather. Both of them were enormously determined, willing to do whatever it took to reach their goals. Feng Xiao normally concealed that determination beneath a veneer of carelessness. Yet right now, Cui Buqu felt that the grave look on Feng Xiao's face was much more pleasing to the eye than his usual blithe smiles.

Feng Xiao shuddered. Blood trickled from the corner of his mouth and he slumped forward.

"How is it?" Cui Buqu caught him and wrapped an arm around his shoulders, guiding him down to lean his forehead against the crook of Cui Buqu's neck.

"Not so good…I'm afraid…" said Feng Xiao weakly.

"Hold on just a little longer. The exit is right in front of us."

Cui Buqu didn’t waste any time. He was tugging Feng Xiao’s arm over his own shoulders to pull him up when Feng Xiao stopped him. “Even if we get out, we don’t know if the Jiejian Bureau will find us before the Thirteen Floors do. If we run into the pavilion leader, I don’t like our chances.”

“What’s the point of saying all this now? Save your breath and escape first!” Cui Buqu admonished him hoarsely. Yet before he could move, he heard a soft sigh in the darkness, and something warm pressed against his lips.

Chapter 124

CUI BUQU HAD WEATHERED many dangers in life and crawled back from the gates of hell more than once. He was neither god nor immortal; it was impossible for him to foresee everything. Even so, he'd never been like this: struck dumb and stunned, as rigid as a block of wood.

Within the darkness of the array, the mist had yet to disperse. The winds wailed and the cold fog drifted thick around them. Perhaps there were eyes out in the dark, watching and waiting for the perfect chance to strike.

Yet Feng Xiao paid none of it any heed. He took advantage of Cui Buqu's sluggish reaction and grew more forward, catching Cui Buqu's wrists and twisting them behind his spine, pushing their torsos flush together.

Cold stone was at Cui Buqu's back, yet the unmistakable heat of a blazing body was pressed to his front, searing even through his clothes. The contrast was like the stark line separating yin from yang, or the heavens from the earth.

For several moments, Cui Buqu was frozen stiff. A look of shocked disbelief was etched into his habitually inscrutable features. He'd even forgotten to moderate his gaze, and his eyes bored into Feng Xiao. His mind roiled with chaos and confusion as his thoughts cycled between *This man has gone mad* and *This Feng bastard has gone into qi deviation after failing to expel the poison.* Which it was, he had no idea.

Displeased with his distraction, Feng Xiao bit down hard on his lip.

It was a new injury on top of old. Cui Buqu's thoughts were dragged back to the pain he'd been in when he'd woken up, and his eyes narrowed.

So it was you!

Feng Xiao had anticipated Cui Buqu would struggle and easily subdued him. Last time he hadn't had the chance to explore, but now he could finally indulge to his heart's content. Finding the taste enjoyable, he transformed into a beast that had snared its prey—first trapping it in his

arms, then luxuriating in the satisfaction of his catch. He wasn't surprised when his prey resisted. He grabbed Cui Buqu's hand and wrote one character on his palm: *Endure.*

Cui Buqu abruptly fell still.

Feng Xiao knew he must be remembering one of the last times they'd kissed like this. Back in the Western Khaganate, Cui Buqu and Feng Xiao had pretended to be cut-sleeves to mislead and win over the first prince. They'd pawed and groped each other right in front of Prince Yixun's servant.

Cui Buqu almost certainly thought the same thing was happening now—that Feng Xiao hoped to trick Yuxiu into dropping his guard, proverbially luring the snake from his hole.

Feng Xiao laughed to himself.

It was true he wanted to lure out Yuxiu. But more than that, he wanted to make up for his own regrets. He'd missed his chance to go farther last time, so this time he wouldn't stop halfway. If Feng Xiao could profit at someone else's expense, he would—that had always been his style.

Cui Buqu had stopped struggling, but his body remained as stiff as a wooden puppet as Feng Xiao kissed him over and over. Feng Xiao's breath came in waves, crashing over him like seawater as they slowly eroded his boundaries. Eyes stubbornly open, Cui Buqu glared. In his heart, he'd already cursed Feng Xiao's ancestors back to the beginning of time. Part of his frustration came from the way his body responded to Feng Xiao's, impossible to control. Part of it was that he refused to be the submissive one. Only his rational mind stopped him from slapping Feng Xiao away.

Yuxiu still hadn't appeared. What was he doing—hadn't it been long enough?! And why was this Feng bastard's tongue so long? What was he, some demon from hell? It was practically lodged in his throat. Wasn't this a show they were putting on for Yuxiu? Did he need to go this far?!

Feng Xiao was almost shaking with laughter, his body trembling as he tried to hold it back. He'd never imagined Cui Buqu could be so cute—he'd told him not to move, and he really wasn't moving. But he couldn't laugh. He'd picked up an enormous windfall, and if he smiled, all his efforts

would go to waste. Considering Cui Buqu's tendency to hold grudges, he'd remember this for the rest of his life.

Behind them, there was indeed an eye watching this scene unfold.

The owner of the eye was a handsome man. If he wished, he could fill his smile with enough love and compassion to wipe all the cruelty from the world. But since the loss of his eye, the bloodlust in his heart had broken through the prison of his neat facade; like a wild beast set free in the mountains, it could no longer be tamed. Instead it rampaged through him, unleashing all the savagery, hypocrisy, and ruthlessness within.

He loathed those who'd driven him to this point. He hated powerful people, and he hated people who sat at the top luxuriating in their glory even more. The two men in front of him just happened to be both.

Cautiously, Yuxiu quieted his breathing. He watched from a distance as Feng Xiao attempted to heal himself, waiting for the opportune moment. It wasn't time yet. If he was patient just a little longer—if he could wait until the moment the needle was about to be expelled—then Feng Xiao would be at his most vulnerable. Only by striking at precisely the right moment could he be certain of killing Feng Xiao.

With Feng Xiao dead, it didn't matter how cunning Cui Buqu was. He would meet the same fate.

Suddenly Yuxiu's eyes widened, and he almost gasped aloud. At first he thought he was seeing things. But as he watched, those two figures pressed together; Feng Xiao's movements were unmistakable.

Yuxiu and Princess Qianjin had also once embraced with only the moon and flowers as their witness. They'd sworn vows to each other, and he had promised to rescue her from a political marriage. Only then could she be truly free.

He looked back at Feng Xiao and Cui Buqu. Their great enemy was here, yet those two were—

Weren't they at all concerned for their lives? How could they still be in the mood for a tryst?! Yuxiu almost burst out laughing. *So that's how it is. That's how it is!*

The Jiejian and Zuoyue Bureaus, two pillars of the power of the imperial court. To think their leaders shared such a filthy and shameful relationship! Despite their pretense of being at each other's throats, the Feng-Cui pair were in secret collusion. If Yang Jian and Dugu Qieluo knew, would they still be happy to listen to their advice—to trust them?

Had Yuxiu still been the Prince of Jin's counselor, he'd have turned and left without a word. He'd have gone straight to the Prince of Jin and told him this secret, grasped their weakness tightly in his hands and used it as blackmail. But he had nothing left. Cui Buqu had exposed his identity, and the Prince of Jin had cast him out. Cui Buqu and Feng Xiao had even managed to ruin the Thirteen Floors' secret gathering.

Yuxiu's fingers tightened around the dagger in his hand.

When he moved, it was so fast he seemed to become one with the mists. The dagger slid from his sleeve as he charged, piercing toward them like light on rippling water, like an arcing rainbow.

His mind entered a state of perfect clarity—in that moment, he understood everything. He broke through the bottleneck that had kept him from advancing in his martial arts.

Even if I stand at the edge of a cliff, I will look ahead without fear. My blade follows my lead, traveling where my heart demands.

This was a speed no mortal could match.

If only…if only he'd grasped this move ten years earlier. Then even a thousand-strong army couldn't have stopped him from stealing the princess away to a place where no one could find her. No matter what her wishes were, he could have spent a lifetime waiting for her to understand. If only he'd grasped it back in the royal yurt during his decisive battle with Feng Xiao—then he could have at least felled his enemy.

But he only grasped it now.

Why now! Resentment blazed within his heart, disrupting the rhythm of his breathing.

The rest happened in an instant. The dagger pierced Feng Xiao's back. Yuxiu felt his true qi split open Feng Xiao's flesh, felt the blood spurt from the wound to spray over the upper half of his face.

No!

Yuxiu stopped. It wasn't blood that had struck his forehead. It was the needle, Liaoyan Shuipo! Was that why Feng Xiao hadn't moved until now? Had he been waiting for him to strike the entire time?

Without thinking, Yuxiu's hand rose to his brow to check. In the twinkling of an eye, Feng Xiao leaned forward and smoothly flicked a hand behind him. A zither string infused with dark wind shot at Yuxiu. Yuxiu still had his dagger in hand, flying forward. It was certain to pierce Feng Xiao's back, but at the same moment, the zither string would slit Yuxiu's throat.

Should he perish with Feng Xiao, or step back and preserve his life?

Hindered by his distraction, the blade lost its momentum. Morale was a tricky thing. It might be high at the decisive moment, but it would collapse the minute one's passions waned. The instant Yuxiu lost the all-consuming desire to kill Feng Xiao, he was destined to fail.

He reeled back, and the dagger retreated with him.

Feng Xiao took the chance to turn, his billowing sleeves raised like a great roc spreading its wings as he swooped down from above. Yuxiu turned on his heel and fled, but it was too late. The zither string was shooting forward like an arrow springing from its bow. Brimming with qi and cloaked in the yin-infused wind, it streaked through the air with a mournful whistle.

A scarlet line materialized on the back of Yuxiu's neck. The crimson thread spread rapidly, until it was a necklace of blood carved deep into his flesh. Yuxiu's legs sprinted onward, but his head had already parted from his body. It tumbled to the ground, frozen in an expression of shock and anger, as if unable to believe his death had come.

The bloody string fell beside his head, just like its victim: crashing down from soaring heights.

When Yuxiu had first appeared in service of the Prince of Jin, he'd possessed the aura of an enlightened monk—handsome, gentle, and full of silent compassion. He'd drawn the admiration of many ladies in the capital. Yet today, Buddhist Master Yuxiu and all his bright prospects had died in this dark and sunless cave. It was a miserable end.

Feng Xiao heaved a long sigh of relief.

He reserved no sympathy for his enemy—but as a fellow warrior, he'd sensed Yuxiu's breakthrough at the end. He hadn't had time to consider it at such a critical moment; he'd had to trust his intuition and strike. If he'd been a fraction slower or more careless, the man lying dead on the ground would be him.

A cough came from behind him as Cui Buqu rose. "You seem quite well now, Deputy Chief Feng."

Shit, thought Feng Xiao. He coughed twice, then clutched his chest and fell forward. He intended to slump against Cui Buqu again, or for Cui Buqu to reach out and support him.

Instead, Cui Buqu stepped aside.

This man was unbelievable. Feng Xiao couldn't actually throw himself on the ground, so he smoothly caught himself on the nearby stone wall to save himself from embarrassment.

"I think Yuxiu's dagger nicked me; I'm a bit dizzy. Please check if it was poisoned," he said feebly.

Cui Buqu hummed. "Let me take a look." He stepped behind Feng Xiao and slapped him hard on the back.

Feng Xiao almost hacked up a lungful of blood. He coughed violently and without pause. This time, it wasn't faked. Vexed, he said, "Is this how you treat your savior?"

"It looks to me like you've been suffering from excessive internal heat lately, Deputy Chief Feng," said Cui Buqu tonelessly. "You've probably gone without the attentions of a woman for too long. I was simply trying to dispel some of the heat for you. It's really too intense. How about I give you another slap?"

Feng Xiao sputtered a laugh. His anger dissipated like smoke, and he sighed. "I fear this heat will be hard to cure. Look at the mediocre masses out there. Who could be worthy of my esteemed gaze? Forget women. To me, even Feng Xiaolian, a ruinous beauty capable of toppling nations, is merely another woman whose looks will fade with time. Form is emptiness, as they say; all things are void."

He paused deliberately and looked Cui Buqu up and down. “Only a certain sickly invalid…is barely passable,” he said pointedly.

Another man might have been moved, but Cui Buqu’s expression remained blank. He stared at Feng Xiao for a long time, then said coolly, “Back in the Western Khaganate, it was necessary to win the first prince’s trust; I had no choice. Today, you used me as bait for Yuxiu. Consider us even. There won’t be a next time.”

His brow was heavy with fatigue, but his gaze was as sharp and clear as ever, as if it could pierce all the schemes of the world while standing detached and unaffected, beyond the red dust of the mortal realm. He said no more after that, but turned and left, looking for the way out.

Feng Xiao followed a few paces behind. There wouldn’t just be a next time, he thought. There’d be a time after that, and a time after that one too.

You wish to remain a bystander, aloof and unmoored, but I wish to drag you into that red dust, send you tumbling until you’re feathered in phoenix down. I want you unable to detach yourself ever again.

Chapter 125

WITHOUT YUXIU hindering them, Cui Buqu swiftly found a path out of the array. But moments after making their grand escape, they found their way barred again.

A man stood at the entrance of the cave, his hands behind his back. It seemed he'd been waiting a long time; when they walked out, he didn't appear surprised in the least. "I see you've dealt with Yuxiu."

Cui Buqu stopped in his tracks.

Fan Yun smiled. "If I hadn't sent the guards away and left you the lamp oil and dagger, you might still be a prisoner. And if I hadn't obstructed Yuan Sansi for you just now, you'd have found yourself up against another powerful enemy directly after dealing with Yuxiu."

Cui Buqu nodded. "Thank you, Xiansheng."

That expression, that demeanor—there was no trace of either gratitude or shame, as if Fan Yun's assistance was to be expected. No matter how well-mannered Fan Yun might be, he couldn't resist raising a brow. "Buqu. It's been so long, yet if anything, you've become more callous. You remain on your guard even after the assistance I've rendered you. To think you mistrust me still—it's truly saddening."

Cui Buqu remained unmoved. "Xiansheng is not being entirely honest. For you, the best outcome would have been for Feng Xiao to slaughter everyone in the Thirteen Floors, then perish together with me in the array. It's a pity the heavens didn't grant your wish. You played a long game, yet here we are, still alive."

Had Fan Yun truly planned to save them, he could have entered the array at any time. Yet he'd waited outside. Perhaps he hadn't tried to kill them, but neither had he wanted them to live.

Taken aback, Fan Yun began to laugh. He'd known Cui Buqu had seen through him, but he hadn't expected it to be so completely.

Feng Xiao took a few steps forward, interposing himself between Fan Yun and Cui Buqu. His feet seemed to have moved unconsciously. “Sir, you were the one who lured us here,” he said. “You hoped we would clash with the Thirteen Floors and destroy each other. How close are you to your goals now, I wonder?”

Fan Yun saw what he’d done and smiled. “You’re injured, but I am not. If I wish to kill Cui Buqu now, you cannot stop me.”

Feng Xiao spoke only three words: “I can try.”

Perhaps he couldn’t kill Fan Yun, but he could certainly make things difficult for him.

Fan Yun gave it some thought.

If he could write off both Cui Buqu and Feng Xiao in one stroke, he’d have achieved half his goals. But he too had been injured during his fight with Yuan Sansi. If he wanted to kill Cui Buqu, he had to go through Feng Xiao. And even injured, Feng Xiao’s martial prowess meant he was still dangerous. There might be no victor at all, yet both of them would pay a steep price.

Before the secret meeting at Mount Tiannan, Fan Yun had assumed Cui Buqu and Feng Xiao were at odds. Though they were both Sui officials and close confidants of the emperor, they were happy to kick each other when they were down and showed each other no sympathy. Fan Yun had never imagined that, in the face of danger, they would willingly put aside their prejudices and work together to safely escape the Ursa Major Twin Jade Array.

Fan Yun heaved a silent sigh of regret. Perhaps it was time to come clean. “It’s true I was never loyal to the Thirteen Floors of Yunhai. If not for me, you might have never known this place existed. Now you’ve got a great accomplishment under your belts, and you’ve even escaped unharmed. You ought to thank me. Though it’s unfortunate that, despite saying he’d come, the pavilion leader never arrived. The depths of his malice are beyond comprehension, and his inscrutable exterior conceals a scheming heart. He must have suspected me for a long time—this secret meeting was a test of my loyalty.”

“Since you’re not truly a member, there should be no issue telling us who the pavilion leader is, as well as his origins and background,” said Cui Buqu.

Fan Yun considered, then said, “You’ve seen him before. He was in Qiemo when you confronted Duan Qihu.”

Cui Buqu instinctively glanced at Feng Xiao, who met his eyes. Feng Xiao was running through the list in his mind: Bing Xian, Yan Xuexing, all the others they’d encountered. Finally he landed on one name.

Xiao Lü.

As soon as he thought it, Cui Buqu spoke: “Xiao Lü.”

Fan Yun nodded. “Correct.”

Xiao Lü was elegant and refined, an illustrious name among his peers. In the Southern dynasty, he was both a renowned member of the literati and a skilled swordsman. But his withered right hand meant he could only wield the sword with his left, and he was unable to become an official. He was exceptionally talented, yet had no outlet for his gifts. It was a terrible pity.

After their interactions in Qiemo, Cui Buqu had been left with a good impression of him—perhaps out of an awareness of their shared rocky beginnings, or because he admired a fellow intellectual. It didn’t surprise him in the least to hear Xiao Lü was the mastermind behind the Thirteen Floors of Yunhai.

Feng Xiao narrowed his eyes. “He deliberately hid his strength when I fought him.”

“I wasn’t there, so I couldn’t say,” said Fan Yun. “But I can tell you he’s a man of incredible talent, not at all your inferior as a martial artist. If he lost to you in a few moves, he’ll have done so on purpose.”

Cui Buqu frowned. “He said he was there to rescue a relative kidnapped by Duan Qihu. The young woman called him Qi-ge—I heard it myself.”

The idea that the pavilion leader of the Thirteen Floors of Yunhai was unable to protect his own kin—that he had been forced to let his subordinate use her as a toy—was laughable.

Fan Yun smiled. “In that case, you were misled by your own cleverness. From what I understand, those women had been tortured to the point of insanity. A fleeting moment would hardly be sufficient for her to recognize her kin. Regardless of what name Xiao Lü called, if someone showed concern and attempted to help her, it’s natural she might make a mistake. I’m guessing Xiao Lü didn’t give the poor woman time to fully regain her senses.”

Cui Buqu nodded. “I was indeed negligent there.”

“Years ago, I happened to encounter Xiao Lü while traveling through Jiangnan. He was seriously injured and hiding beneath a bamboo raft in the water, with enemies ahead and pursuers close behind. I saved him from the danger, and he expressed deep gratitude. After that, we maintained contact and often exchanged letters. He’s no less intelligent than you, able to grasp grand concepts with only the slightest hints, and so I greatly admired his talents.”

Feng Xiao feigned astonishment. “What peculiar hobbies you have, sir. Not only do you enjoy playing master to others, you have a knack for picking students who turn on you!”

The corners of Cui Buqu’s mouth curled slightly.

Fan Yun also gave a wry smile. “No need to mock me. It’s true I gravely misjudged his character. At the time, I viewed him as merely a talented young man from a prestigious clan, frustrated in his ambitions. Whatever he asked, I answered without hesitation. Two years ago, he invited me to join the Thirteen Floors of Yunhai and expressed his desire for me to take the position of San-xiansheng, third among the directors. Only then did I realize how many masters he’d been quietly recruiting, and the magnitude of the scheme he’d woven.”

“Xiao Lü hails from the Southern dynasty,” mused Cui Buqu. “The Xiao clan was the ruling family of a previous dynasty, and their social connections are extensive. By contrast, the current emperor of the Southern dynasty, Chen Shubao, is a second A-Dou[2]—he’s a fool beyond saving. There is no shortage of capable individuals eager to exert their influence over the Southern dynasty, or even claim the throne for themselves. Yet if the Thirteen Floors of Yunhai have accomplished anything in the south, I’ve heard little about it.”

“You’re right,” said Fan Yun. “Because each time he schemed against Chen Shubao, I quietly sabotaged him.”

Understanding dawned on Cui Buqu—now everything made sense.

Fan Yun served the Southern dynasty, so he wished to thwart Xiao Lü’s ambitions there. But he would be no better off if Cui Buqu and Feng Xiao emerged victorious. The best outcome as far as Fan Yun was concerned was for Xiao Lü and Cui Buqu to engage in a match that would ensure their mutual destruction.

“I never imagined someone as intelligent as Xiansheng, who claims to know everything about the world and its politics, would do something so foolish,” said Cui Buqu. “To think you would pour all your energies into assisting such a hopelessly incompetent king.”

A hint of bitterness finally warped Fan Yun’s smile. “Now there you’re mistaken. Chen Shubao is not merely incompetent; he’s so inept even the foolish emperor A-Dou of Shu Han pales in comparison. Of this I’m fully aware—but an old friend entrusted me with the task, and thus I have no choice but to give it my all. I know it’s impossible, but still I must make the attempt. From the moment I swore this vow, I was prepared to fail utterly.”

“Who is this old friend for whom Xiansheng is willing to do so much?” inquired Cui Buqu.

“He passed long ago. There’s no point in mentioning him now.” Fan Yun closed his eyes, burying all the tribulations he’d weathered and the weaknesses he’d inadvertently revealed. When he opened them again, he was once more the accomplished strategist, the Zhuge Liang who’d masterfully played Cui Buqu and the Thirteen Floors against each other in order to reap the rewards.

“Enough chatter,” Fan Yun said finally. “I’ve given you crucial information about the Thirteen Floors—shouldn’t you offer me something in return?”

“What do you want?” asked Cui Buqu.

“Either of your lives will do.”

Before the words were out, he was moving, the smile still on his face. Fan Yun swept toward them like a whirlwind, his hand outstretched to grab Cui Buqu.

Chapter 126

THE INSTANT Fan Yun leapt forward, Feng Xiao moved as well, launching a palm strike at Fan Yun's back. If Fan Yun hoped to protect himself, he would have to abandon his attack on Cui Buqu.

But when Cui Buqu flinched back from Fan Yun's incoming strike, the fierce air currents of the blow gentled, transforming into a soft breeze that caressed his face. Fan Yun turned from his feint and lunged toward Feng Xiao.

Cui Buqu saw at once—Fan Yun's target had been Feng Xiao all along. With Feng Xiao dead, Cui Buqu would have no choice but to surrender, while if Feng Xiao escaped, Fan Yun would be plagued with endless troubles.

It was too late for Feng Xiao to switch tactics in time; Fan Yun was already at his back. He withdrew his hand and turned to catch Fan Yun's strike hard on his shoulder. A zither string flicked out from his other hand, forcing Fan Yun to leap back.

Feng Xiao had taken a blow to his shoulder, but Fan Yun had fared no better—the qi-infused string had opened a gash on his arm. Blood soaked through the torn cloth of his sleeve and enveloped his arm in crimson.

From start to finish, everything had happened in the space of one of Cui Buqu's breaths. The two clashed again in the next moment, ignoring Cui Buqu entirely. Their collision was like a violent tempest, complete with roaring thunder as their qi exploded outward to sweep up the rain-wet leaves littering the ground outside the cave. The fallen leaves churned through the air in a howling dance, accompanied by grit and debris. If anyone escaped the array now, they'd barely have time to celebrate before finding themselves tossed back into the cave by the maelstrom of qi.

The force of their battle surged toward Cui Buqu, shoving him back step by step. In the blink of an eye, he found himself at the edge of the cliff. He wrapped his arms around a tree trunk just in time, or he'd have found himself plummeting to his death without Fan Yun having to lift a finger.

Only now did Cui Buqu truly grasp his teacher’s strength. Fan Yun was a man of great knowledge and breadth of mind. He’d traveled the world when he was young, and later his talents had been recognized by Liuli Palace when they invited him to join them as a consultant. But in truth, he had little connection with the record-keeping sect. He’d retained all his old habits—he was carefree and unrestrained, roaming the land like an idle cloud or wild crane. All that was known about him was that he was a descendant of the Fan clan. His martial arts, his origins, his education—all remained a mystery.

After taking over the Zuoyue Bureau, Cui Buqu had sent his people to secretly investigate Fan Yun and found that he was closely associated with Linchuan Academy, the largest sect in the Southern dynasty. Though his martial arts incorporated his own innovations and improvements, the shadow of Linchuan Academy’s signature style was perceptible in his moves.

Linchuan Academy was a dedicated proponent of Confucianism, and their academy masters were all renowned Confucians in addition to being formidable martial artists. They devoted their lives to the idea of assisting a wise emperor in unifying the Central Plains and restoring the land to the Han people.

Cui Buqu raised his hand and coughed a few times. The salty tang of blood rose in his throat and trickled from the corners of his mouth to dampen his fingers. He swiped it away with the back of his hand, indifferent, and slumped against a large boulder, settling in to observe the battle. His eyes narrowed slightly as he fought down nausea and dizziness.

“Fan Yun,” he called, “you went to great lengths to lure me here. Xiao Lü may not have shown himself, but what’s transpired here today will be a harsh blow to him. I’ve already outlived my usefulness—why not kill me first?”

Fan Yun laughed. “It’s no use trying to provoke me. Deputy Chief Feng is a peerless martial artist; I won’t have any peace if I don’t defeat him now. Buqu, do you know why I refused to accept you as my disciple?”

His next attack missed, but he didn’t force the offensive. His steps were feather-light as he and Feng Xiao circled each other, each patiently awaiting his chance.

“It was I who refused to take you as a master,” said Cui Buqu coolly. “Don’t get it backward.”

Fan Yun continued to smile, pretending not to hear. “I read your fortune from your face when we first met. Your fate is a grim one, devoid of kin to aid you. You are destined to meet with calamity after calamity, and the moment you fail to overcome one, you will die a premature death, dragging those around you into disaster. Those close to you will find only misfortune. Look what happened this time: You were forced to come alone because Qiao Xian was injured. Isn’t that right?”

He appeared to be talking to Cui Buqu, but it was clear his words were meant for Feng Xiao. Other than exceptions like Cui Buqu, who refused to acknowledge the influence of the heavens, everyone from the most exalted emperor to the lowliest peddler believed in fate. Even Fan Yun himself, who’d seen nearly everything there was to see of the world, believed fate was not something humans could change. He’d once tried—when his old friend was gravely ill, he’d attempted to exchange part of his friend’s destiny with his own. But in the end, this too had been in vain.

Cui Buqu’s face was a mask of indifference, as unmoved as sturdy bamboo standing tall amid the wind and rain. His frail, sickly body

contained a core as hard and cold as steel. But even if he was indifferent to fate, it didn’t mean others would be too. There were hundreds of ways to break one’s enemy, but a blow to their mind was most effective.

A loud scoff broke the silence—Feng Xiao was laughing. “What a coincidence. A fortune teller once said my fate is the most fortuitous possible. I was born with glory in hand, a silver spoon in my mouth. Even the lone star of calamity[3] is helpless against me. Lao-Fan, at your age, you really oughtn’t put yourself through this. If you surrender now and admit defeat, my venerable self might be convinced to leave your body intact. You’ll at least be saved from roaming the underworld in search of your head!”

He lunged forward in another strike. Fan Yun met his blow, and their qi exploded with a roar that tossed them both backward. Fan Yun landed smoothly on his toes, his expression composed.

“I forgot,” said Fan Yun. “As a demonic practitioner, you’re more open-minded than most.”

Seeing Feng Xiao couldn’t be distracted with words, Fan Yun fell silent. He drew his blade, and a sword glare burst from his qi and ripped toward Feng Xiao.

At once, heavy rain and clouds choked the sky. As the attack streaked toward its target, the mist and rain melded, dappling a clear and rippling lake surface with shimmering scales beneath the crimson of the setting sun. It was a magnificent, fantastical sight.

With a tap of his toes, Feng Xiao flew backward, his sleeves spread like wings as he shattered Fan Yun’s illusions. The storm vanished in an instant, leaving a gloriously clear sky.

Fan Yun didn’t stop. He swept forward with the sword glare and was in front of Feng Xiao in the blink of an eye. The afterimages of his bright sword wove themselves layer upon layer into a curtain of qi. As the misty rains scattered, another scene materialized, persistent and unfading as a wall of storm clouds. Rocks and sand flew from the force of the sword qi, and splintered leaves swirled through the air like rain. Feng Xiao was engulfed, with nowhere to run.

In the thick of battle, Feng Xiao could feel the depth of Fan Yun's swordplay: brilliant and ethereal, yet brimming with bloodlust. The moment he slipped, he'd be dead.

Feng Xiao had known Fan Yun was a skilled martial artist, but he'd never taken him seriously as an opponent. The man was over fifty, yet he had no reputation within the jianghu. Whatever skill he had, it could hardly be spectacular. He'd obtained his position in the Thirteen Floors because the pavilion leader valued his strategies, not his martial arts. In contrast, Yuxiu and Yuan Sansi were some of the finest martial artists of their generation.

Now Feng Xiao saw he'd been mistaken.

Fan Yun wasn't simply a good martial artist. Even Feng Xiao, with all his pride, had to admit that his skills ranked far above the top tier—this man could compete on even footing with the grandmasters.

Why would such a powerful martial artist be completely unknown? Thoughts racing, Feng Xiao suddenly hit on a possibility.

Liuli Palace of Fangzhang Isle was responsible for all martial rankings. Their records of the martial world weren't perfect, but they were close. Fan Yun could easily have used his connections there to expunge his name from the sect's records. He wasn't a member of the jianghu and did not travel its roads, nor did he fight often. It was unsurprising few people knew of him.

Pain spiked through Feng Xiao's back where he'd expelled Yuxiu's needle. His meridians there were undoubtedly injured.

But Feng Xiao's hand remained steady.

The zither string shot from his sleeve, stretched taut. One end remained in his grip, while the other dove toward the onrushing sword glare, ringing brightly as it tore through the arcing sword qi and shattered the mirage. As the note from the string reached Fan Yun's ears, sound waves infused with Feng Xiao's internal energy blasted away the qi protecting Fan Yun and funneled into his eardrums.

Fan Yun hadn't anticipated that his opponent would transform sound itself into a weapon; he looked at Feng Xiao in surprise.

The Fajing Sect specialized in the use of the zither in combat. Feng Xiao would have been more at ease if he'd had one with him—alas, he'd already removed the precious Yuyin's strings one by one. Fan Yun was an educated man; had he known the string attacking him came from a zither on par with the renowned Raoliang, he'd have likely flown into a rage and stabbed Feng Xiao to death right then and there.

But he didn't know—and so his hand only trembled slightly as the sound waves disrupted his attack. The sword glare shivered, and the curtain of afterimages scattered its layers into the sky. Like the howling sea winds, it gathered the fury of raging waves to churn the clouds and batter the shore as it once again swallowed Feng Xiao.

From within the sword glare, Feng Xiao flicked another string at Fan Yun.

Like adversaries rushing toward each other on a narrow road, they met head-on. Victory would be determined not by their minute difference in skill, but through the smallest variables.

And there were countless such variables in a duel of this caliber. Feng Xiao's injuries hadn't escaped Fan Yun's notice. Feng Xiao's right hand was unsteady, and his attacks were slightly weaker on that side. It was an extremely subtle difference, but Fan Yun saw it. Of course he took advantage. The right side of the screen of sword qi grew denser as it continued its assault.

Suddenly Fan Yun heard Cui Buqu's voice: "I know who entrusted you with this task."

The words were as faint and misty as drizzling rain on a spring night, tiny pinpricks of silver. But Fan Yun's sharp ears would have picked them up even if they were soft as a mosquito's buzz.

"It was the emperor of Chen," said Cui Buqu. "Not the current emperor, Chen Shubao, but the previous emperor, Chen Xu. Emperor Xuan was a skilled and capable leader who accomplished whatever he set out to do. His reign lasted more than a dozen years. Though he wasn't among the most brilliant of emperors, he was wise. Unfortunately, he died young, leaving no one qualified to succeed him. His son Chen Shubao is wholly unlike him, an immature fool who has wasted generations of his forefathers' blood, sweat, and tears."

In that moment, Fan Yun wished he could turn back time itself and stop Cui Buqu from speaking. But such a thing was impossible—Cui Buqu had already spoken, and all Fan Yun could do was let the words drift into his ears. The chief of the Zuoyue Bureau truly deserved his reputation: Every word was a knife, stabbing unerringly into the tenderest spots in Fan Yun's heart and shattering his composure.

"Xiansheng, you were close to Emperor Xuan. On his deathbed, he entrusted you with his son—yet that son was a fool beyond saving. But your old friend had passed, and you'd given him your solemn word. You had no choice but to dedicate yourself to carrying out his request, just as Zhuge Liang attempted to prop up that foolish emperor of Shu Han. You've been turning this way and that, spinning in futile circles. You instigated our conflict with the Thirteen Floors of Yunhai, all for the sake of the emperor of Southern Chen. But the greatest pity is that the emperor will never understand your kindness. No matter how exemplary your martial arts, no matter how clever your plots and schemes, I fear you're fated to walk the path of that great strategist and perish on the Wuzhang Plains. You know it's impossible, yet you must attempt it. Surely Xiansheng knows what awaits him at the end of this road."

Cui Buqu's words rushed out faster and faster, each a dagger striking its mark, carving open flesh to reveal white bone. Fan Yun's breath hitched, and his sword glare wavered. Had Cui Buqu spoken these words at any other moment, they wouldn't have had the effect they did now. Fan Yun suddenly regretted the mercy he'd shown Cui Buqu. He should have killed this man first.

He lost his composure for the briefest moment—but that was enough for Feng Xiao.

The zither string tore through the screen of afterimages and pierced Fan Yun's sword hand, and Feng Xiao shot forward, right behind it.

Fan Yun paled in alarm. Before he could dodge, Feng Xiao's palm slammed into his chest. Fan Yun stumbled backward and hacked up a mouthful of blood.

Feng Xiao gave him no chance to recover. He pressed forward, striking thrice in rapid succession. Fan Yun took the first two head-on, staggering back as his face turned ashen. By the time the third blow arrived,

he’d had enough. He turned and ran, leaping down the cliff and landing on the stones below. Within a few more bounds, his figure vanished into the mountain mists.

“Erlang!”

Moments after Fan Yun disappeared, a large group rushed over. At their head was Ming Yue, the third chief of the Jiejian Bureau, with the bureau’s eagle riders behind him. Among them was another familiar face: Lin Yong, the young master of Yandang Mountain Estate.

Cui Buqu had used up all his breath with his final speech. He could hold on no longer—he slumped to the side, pain spiking through him as his injured body struck the rocks, yet unable to stop himself. Feng Xiao swiftly caught him before his head slammed into the ground.

He looked up at Ming Yue in surprise. “You certainly know how to make an entrance,” he said, acid.

Ming Yue’s smile was strained. “Their lair was well-hidden; we looked over half the mountain and couldn’t find it. I happened to capture this man and had him guide us here.”

Feng Xiao jerked his chin, signaling for Ming Yue to unseal Lin Yong’s mute acupoint.

The instant his voice was freed, Lin Yong cried, “Yuntian! I’ve never done you any harm; I wouldn’t help them hurt you! Yuan Sansi told me to poison you, but I refused! From the first time I laid eyes on you, I’ve always admired you. Even a glance from you is enough to make me happy —”

Feng Xiao’s mouth twitched. “Gag him!”

“Don’t! I’ll stop talking, all right!”

Feng Xiao knew perfectly well that Lin Yong only appeared open and sociable. In reality, he was a schemer—why else would he have feigned harmlessness to conceal his membership in the Thirteen Floors of Yunhai? No matter what he babbled, Feng Xiao remained unmoved. “Where are the others?”

“When the fire broke out, that old bastard Ning Shewo fled even faster than I did. I was trapped within the array and delayed for some time. I

didn’t see anyone when I came out—the only ones I ran into were your subordinates here.”

“Then where’s your Pavilion Leader Xiao? Can he really remain uninvolved after an incident like this?”

Lin Yong composed himself. “The Thirteen Floors of Yunhai place great value on hierarchy. I’ve never met the pavilion leader. Only the likes of Fan-xiansheng and Yuxiu saw him regularly.”

Cui Buqu coughed. “He’s lying. Extract a confession from him once we get back. Use incense of helplessness.”

Lin Yong’s face fell. Burning hatred flashed in his eyes; he shook off the riders holding him and turned to flee.

Silver light shot from Ming Yue’s sleeve and struck Lin Yong’s shoulder. He fell down with a cry, and the eagle riders pounced on him to restrain him.

A drizzling rain had begun to fall again.

Feng Xiao had neither the strength nor inclination to interrogate Lin Yong just now; he waved a hand for eagle riders to take him away.

Spotting Cui Buqu still on the ground, Ming Yue strode over to help him up. Cui Buqu accepted his assistance, thanking him in a low voice. Behind him, Feng Xiao said coolly, “This invalid can’t even stand, and you want him to walk by himself. How far do you think he’ll get?”

Cui Buqu felt his feet leave the ground. A moment later, he was cradled in Feng Xiao’s arms.

Ming Yue was an upright person. This sight was a shock to him. “Erlang, you’re injured! Let me carry him!”

“I’ve already picked him up. Switching hands now will only be a hassle.” Feng Xiao wrinkled his nose at Cui Buqu. “You smell like blood and dirt. It’s nauseating. Didn’t you hear what that Fan bastard said? Your fate is harsh; anyone who gets close will suffer. I may be destined for greatness, but don’t think for a moment I’ll let you leech good fortune from me when we get back to the capital. Hurry up and find a fortune teller; change your fate. I don’t want your bad luck rubbing off on me…”

Cui Buqu was exhausted; the jostling as Feng Xiao carried him made his stomach churn. He could only press his lips tightly shut against the rising desire to cough up blood and use what little strength he had to roll his eyes.

Behind them, Ming Yue listened in confusion. *If he's worried about bad luck, why carry him down the mountain? Is he actually complaining, or is this some bizarre attempt at sarcasm?*

Chapter 127

INCENSE OF HELPLESSNESS produced entirely different results depending on the person upon whom it was used.

Feng Xiao still remembered the way Cui Buqu had endured the bone-melting pain of the incense yet retained enough reason to meet him in a clash of wits. Indeed, perhaps Cui Buqu's biggest mistake was that he'd been *too* calm and sober under the effects of the incense. It had roused Feng Xiao's suspicions.

Yuxiu, too, had inhaled this incense thanks to Cui Buqu's scheming. He'd fought fiercely against Feng Xiao while poisoned and even managed to escape.

Lin Yong, on the other hand, crumpled like wet paper.

"Lin Yong told us everything he did as a member of the Thirteen Floors of Yunhai," Ming Yue said, relaying the results of his interrogation to Feng Xiao and Cui Buqu. "Each director has defined responsibilities, and his was finance. Xiao Lü provided him with financial resources, and he made a great deal of money for them. According to him, the Thirteen Floors are highly decentralized. As long as there were no pressing matters, the members didn't communicate; he knows very little. He can't even tell us what other pawns Xiao Lü might have planted in the north. The only somewhat useful lead he shared was the various methods by which Yandang Mountain Estate directly or indirectly contacted Xiao Lü."

Ming Yue paused. "But Xiao Lü never showed up to this meeting. We can only assume he noticed something suspicious about Fan Yun and declined to step into the trap. Now that we have Lin Yong, he's probably disposed of those methods of contact. I fear when we send people to investigate, they'll find an empty building. Of the current directors, Yuxiu, Lin Yong, Duan Qihu, Feng Xiaolian, and Yuheng have been eliminated. And Fan Yun, Xiao Lü's most valued strategist, has betrayed him; he can't use him either. Without Fan Yun, the Thirteen Floors is a dragon with one eye, a bird without wings. I doubt they'll give us any more trouble."

Although Ming Yue was the third chief of the Jiejian Bureau, he lived a simple life. He'd never made a name for himself in the jianghu, nor could he boast any grand achievements in the imperial court. He remained inconspicuous, and thus most people considered Feng Xiao the supporting pillar of the Jiejian Bureau and discounted the third chief as insignificant. But Cui Buqu knew better. Feng Xiao spent his days running hither and thither. Without someone in the capital to oversee daily operations, the Jiejian Bureau would have collapsed long ago. Thus he felt no surprise upon hearing Ming Yue's methodical analysis; indeed, it was wholly within his expectations.

Ming Yue's strength lay not in garnering glory or attention, but in standing guard behind the scenes. If Feng Xiao was the wings and fangs of the Jiejian Bureau, Ming Yue was its steadily beating heart.

"What about the guards and maids from the cave?" Feng Xiao asked. "Did we learn anything from them?"

Shaking his head, Ming Yue explained, "They were recruited to the Thirteen Floors of Yunhai after their own sects were destroyed. They're no elite forces. Besides, they've been trapped in that cave for years. Most of them know very little—but a man named Liang Feng gave us one clue. He said the pavilion leader had appeared at a previous gathering with someone else who wasn't present this time: a girl with a veil. He never saw her face, but he heard the pavilion leader call her *Huan-niang*. He said they seemed close."

Feng Xiao instinctively glanced at Cui Buqu. "Is there a woman in the jianghu with the surname Huan?"

Cui Buqu coughed a few times and frowned. After thinking for a long time, he said firmly, "No. Perhaps an alias."

He sat on the bed wrapped in a blanket, his face lined with fatigue. Ming Yue and Feng Xiao had channeled him a sizable amount of qi, but it would take some time for his severely damaged body to heal. Not only had he been made to hold his nose and take his medicine, whenever he pictured the displeased expressions he was sure to see on the faces of the Zuoyue Bureau's other members, his mood sank lower still.

As a powerful martial artist, Feng Xiao was far better off, yet even he was wrapped in layers of bandages beneath his clothes.

“Let me take care of the cleanup here,” Ming Yue offered, seeing the poor state they were in. “Save the rest for when we return to the capital. One more thing though—we looked all through the caves, but we didn’t find the Jade of Heaven Lake. Someone must have fled with it.”

When Fan Yun had said the Jade of Heaven Lake could prolong his life, even Cui Buqu had wavered. He was no god or immortal—he was a human being, bound to the rules of the mortal world. And he would rather live than die. Yet at this news, his expression remained devoid of emotion. Perhaps he was already accustomed to the callousness with which the heavens treated him. Through all those trials and tribulations, he’d learned to rely on himself alone, not anything so hollow as hope.

Most ordinary men would be bedridden for weeks after being stabbed in the chest, yet here Cui Buqu was, sitting up talking to Feng Xiao and Ming Yue. This, too, was proof of his iron will: Even the heavens couldn’t touch him.

Feng Xiao took a glance, then found he couldn’t stop himself from taking a second and a third.

Eventually even Ming Yue noticed something was off. Puzzled, he looked at Feng Xiao, who promptly averted his eyes as if nothing had happened. “Two Zuoyue guards accompanied us up the mountain. Did you find them?”

Ming Yue sighed. “I did. Their bodies were found at the foot of Mount Tiannan—both suffered a fatal blow to the skull. The Thirteen Floors must have thought them too risky to keep alive, so they simply killed them and disposed of the bodies.”

Feng Xiao considered this. “It’s rare to kill barehanded rather than with weapons. Perhaps it was Yuan Sansi or Yuxiu.”

“No matter who did it, we will collect payment for this debt from the Thirteen Floors of Yunhai,” said Cui Buqu coldly.

“Xiao Lü only has a few people left now—Yuan Sansi and Ning Shewo, as well as some others,” said Feng Xiao. “Knowing him, he would rather leave seats empty than fill them with inferior people. We merely need to find Xiao Lü, and we can eradicate the Thirteen Floors of Yunhai once and for all.”

“I’m afraid it’s not that simple.” Cui Buqu’s brow was heavy with fatigue. Even his voice had grown quieter. “Fan Yun implied that the scope of Xiao Lü’s operation stretches far beyond the handful of directors we know. And he’s smart enough to have anticipated Fan Yun’s betrayal.”

Feng Xiao chuckled. “Xiao Lü never showed himself this time. Perhaps he decided to let events take their course and exchange Yuxiu and Yuan Sansi’s lives for our own. Fan Yun was like the mantis stalking the cicada, planning to snap up the prize in the aftermath, unaware that Xiao Lü was the oriole behind him, waiting to strike.”

Ming Yue frowned. When Feng Xiao had left the capital, he’d only said he was going to find a new zither. Ming Yue had assumed him merely bored—he’d never imagined the journey would end in such a messy train of events. If Cui Buqu and Feng Xiao had been slightly less capable, or a little less fortunate, they would both have lost their lives.

The Thirteen Floors of Yunhai were like a looming beast hidden in the shadows. As they slowly lured the monster into the open, they realized to their horror that its great jaws were already open wide. At any moment, it would snap them shut and crush its prey between its teeth.

Xiao Lü’s traces were scattered all across the north and south, from the halls of the imperial court to the depths of the jianghu. There was nowhere the Thirteen Floors couldn’t touch. If even the governor of Boling Commandery belonged to them, what about the positions below governor? Were there spies among the county magistrates and lieutenants? And what about the positions above? Did agents of the Thirteen Floors also lurk within the capital?

Ming Yue’s heart thudded. He suddenly understood why Xiao Lü was so determined to rid himself of Feng Xiao and Cui Buqu.

The Jiejian and Zuoyue Bureaus held the court and jianghu within their grasp. Their reach extended beyond the Great Wall, complete with a vast network of information channels both large and small. If their leaders were removed, the tiger would be declawed—it would still be a fearsome-looking beast to be sure, but one that had lost most of its power. With nothing to fear, the spies the Thirteen Floors had planted would silently flourish.

And despite everything they'd discovered, there were more oddities yet to be explained.

"I still think it's strange," said Ming Yue. "The Central Plains have been in constant upheaval since the two Jin dynasties. There's been no lack of officials rising to power overnight, and…ah, cases where relatives of the royal family have seized the throne. But all these possessed either supporters at court or great military power. Xiao Lü hails from the Southern dynasty, but he doesn't even merit Chen Shubao's regard. His reputation in his own nation is modest, and his connections fall far short of what's required to usurp a throne. What's more, the forces of the Thirteen Floors are not confined to any nation, but scattered across the land.

"Take Yuan Sansi—he's achieved the rank of commandery governor, but he's a long way yet from making his mark in the central government. There's no way he can initiate a coup. Then there's Yuxiu. If he were still alive—and if the two of you hadn't exposed him—he might still be the Prince of Jin's trusted aide. But no matter how much trust the Prince of Jin placed in him, he would never launch a revolt because Yuxiu urged him to. Without someone closer to the throne, it doesn't matter how many spies the Thirteen Floors have planted. They'll never be able to overthrow the emperor."

Cui Buqu was silent for a moment, then said slowly, "Yuan Sansi entered the court as an official. Who has he come into contact with over the years—who promoted him, and who is he close to? I assume the Jiejian Bureau can easily find out."

"An excellent point, Chief Cui. I'll investigate as soon as we return to the capital." This was indeed crucial information. Ming Yue hurriedly noted down everything about the case, lest he miss any detail.

The Zuoyue Bureau had no business interfering with the affairs of the Jiejian Bureau. In the past, Feng Xiao would have mocked Cui Buqu for his presumption, but now, he remained quiet and made no objection. Ming Yue silently wondered if the sun would rise in the west next.

"Yuxiu was with the Prince of Jin for several years," said Cui Buqu, "He may have influenced the prince to befriend certain people, or to make specific suggestions to the empress. Such things have nothing to do with the jianghu, and are therefore out of the Zuoyue Bureau's sphere. If the Jiejian

Bureau wishes to investigate, they should start there. The Prince of Jin has a mercurial temper, so it may take considerable effort…”

His voice grew softer and softer, until Ming Yue could no longer make out the words. He looked up from his notes to find that Cui Buqu had fallen asleep sitting up.

While Ming Yue sat stunned, Feng Xiao had already stepped over. He helped Cui Buqu lie down and covered him with the blanket.

“He’s exhausted himself overthinking,” said Ming Yue. “If Cui-langjun keeps this up, I fear it…it isn’t a good sign.” He’d intended to say it was a sign he wouldn’t live long, but it didn’t feel right to speak it aloud. He swallowed his words back down.

“Without these things to busy himself with, he probably would have collapsed hours ago,” Feng Xiao said.

When Ming Yue looked back at him in confusion, Feng Xiao changed the subject. “Fan Yun might not be loyal to the Thirteen Floors, but he’s still an important player in this game. He knows many of their secrets; we can’t let him slip through our fingers. Find him as soon as possible—he may be the key to tracking down both the jade and Xiao Lü.”

Ming Yue nodded his assent.

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Within his dream, Cui Buqu heard the murmur of voices drifting past like the shadows of a revolving lantern. The words slid by, faint and indistinct, like the various things and people he’d seen throughout his life. At last, they receded like the tide, and everything returned to silence.

Many times, Cui Buqu had felt that if he allowed himself to sleep, he would never wake again. A fatigue so immense it bordered on death would loom within his heart, wrapping around his body like dense silk until he was unable to breathe. But his life wasn’t fated to end here. No matter how excruciating his dreams, he always struggled awake in the end and opened his eyes.

Today was no different.

Even he was impressed by his own tenacity sometimes.

Cui Buqu stared at the bed canopy overhead, blinking slowly. It took him a quarter of an hour to recall where he was, and why.

He was in a small town at the foot of Mount Tiannan. After descending the mountain, Ming Yue had needed time to deal with the remnants of the Thirteen Floors. He dispatched men to escort the guards and maids back to the capital for a thorough interrogation, while Feng Xiao and Cui Buqu stayed and recuperated before beginning their own journey.

At his bedside sat a letter stamped with the Zuoyue Bureau's seal, the wax still intact. Cui Buqu opened it and saw it was from Qiao Xian. The mark on the seal meant the contents weren't confidential, so it had likely arrived via official post. Either Ming Yue or Feng Xiao must have seen it and brought it to him.

Qiao Xian explained that they'd found no traces of the Thirteen Floors of Yunhai in Donghai Commandery. This was hardly surprising, as it was Fan Yun himself who'd laid the false clues to lure him there.

After Qiao Xian had been injured during their adventure in the Western Khaganate, Cui Buqu had instructed her to stay in the capital. Apparently she couldn't bear to remain idle and had run off to Donghai Commandery with Zhangsun Bodhi. Cui Buqu could see her disappointment at having nothing to show for it in every stroke of her brush as she asked him what they ought to do next.

Voices rose outside.

Cui Buqu lit a candle and fed the letter bit by bit to the flame, burning the paper to ash. Then he got off the bed and stepped into his boots, planning to freshen up. The sweet fragrance of osmanthus wafted in through the window. After the time he'd spent in that dark, sunless cave, even an ordinary cloudy day was crisp and refreshing.

Cui Buqu was in a good mood.

When he opened the door, he found Feng Xiao and Ming Yue playing a game at a small table in the yard. Injured he might be, but Deputy Chief Feng could never be happy quietly recuperating in bed. Cui Buqu gave their game a brief glance before looking away in disinterest.

Ming Yue stood and cupped his hands in greeting. As he ranked below Cui Buqu, this was only proper. Cui Buqu acknowledged him with a nod. “No need to be so polite, Third Chief. Keep playing; I’m going to take a walk.”

Feng Xiao called him back. “Care for a match?”

“I don’t know how to play.”

Feng Xiao was stunned. “You don’t know how to play shupu?”

This and other board games like it had originated during the late Han dynasty. Nowadays, it wasn’t just popular in the capital; master players roamed streets and marketplaces even in remote locales.

Cui Buqu answered Feng Xiao’s question with a guileless expression —*Is it strange I don’t know how to play?*

But it really was strange. Feng Xiao looked at him as he might regard a bizarre bird with four wings. After staring for a long moment, he said, “I left some food for you on the stove. I’ll teach you after you eat.”

Cui Buqu shook his head. “Why do I need to learn?”

“All you do is work. Are there any hobbies you enjoy?”

“Work is my hobby,” said Cui Buqu, unfazed.

Feng Xiao shot Ming Yue a look, as if to say *See?*

Ming Yue was fully onboard. Wouldn’t it be wonderful if Deputy Chief Feng, who was all play and no work, and Chief Cui Buqu, who was all work and no play, could rub off on each other a bit?

But in the face of Cui Buqu’s dull response, no matter how he wracked his brain, Ming Yue couldn’t think of what to say. Only Feng Xiao retained his enthusiasm.

“How about we make a bet?” he suggested. “I’ll teach you the rules and we’ll play a few rounds. Best two out of three. The loser must agree to one request made by the winner.”

Cui Buqu finally grew interested. “Any request?”

Feng Xiao arched a brow. “Of course, as long as it’s within my power to grant.”

“Such a generous offer, Deputy Chief Feng. You mustn’t go back on your word when the time comes.”

Feng Xiao smiled a little. “What will you request—or could it be that you want me?”

A muscle in Cui Buqu’s jaw jumped as he remembered what had happened in the array. He scrubbed it from his mind at once, refusing to dwell on anything so unnecessary. It had been an accident. Or perhaps Feng Xiao had acted on some desperate impulse. Maybe it was even a joke. The only thing it couldn’t be was serious.

Feng Xiao was never serious.

Feng-er loved himself more than anyone. How could he hold any true regard for someone else? And Cui Buqu was destined for a life of solitude. Why worry about something so pointless?

“I want the names of Sui officials in every county and commandery, at every rank,” Cui Buqu said languidly.

Feng Xiao’s smile froze on his face.

The Ministry of Personnel had their own lists of officials, but the Jiejian Bureau’s was more detailed. Their records included things like hobbies, number of concubines, and even secrets, such as if they snored in their sleep.

Cui Buqu had coveted such a list for a long time, and today, he finally had his chance. How could he let it slip by?

Ming Yue turned his head away. It took all he had to stop himself from laughing.

Chapter 128

THE RULES OF SHUPU were easily grasped. After watching Feng Xiao and Ming Yue's next game, Cui Buqu understood well enough. The game didn't rely only on strategy—luck was needed as well. Cui Buqu turned out to be fairly lucky and won the first match.

Ming Yue still had business to finish, so he excused himself after a round. Feng Xiao and Cui Buqu sat together in the garden, surrounded by the sweet scent of osmanthus. Sunlight trickled through the pale yellow petals. The autumn sun bathed them in its meager warmth, and the fragrance of flowers drifted on the breeze. But the heart of the tableau was the pair sitting beneath the tree: Where people were, the bustle and vigor of life followed.

The gameboard sat upon a stone table polished to a spotless gleam. Even the jade-green teacups at the side of the board rippled like a clear emerald spring.

Naturally, these items all belonged to Feng Xiao. Ming Yue knew his boss too well—he'd bought a new tea set and washed it thrice with boiling water. Otherwise, Feng Xiao would doubtless complain about some imagined speck of dust at the bottom of his cup until the end of time.

Cui Buqu held a bowl of millet porridge, sipping as he played. The warmth flowed from his throat to his stomach, revitalizing his body slowly but surely. He was a much more adaptable creature than Feng Xiao. If there was no other food to be had, someone could hand him a bowl of congee mixed with gravel. As long as he was hungry enough, he'd placidly lift the bowl and eat.

A little less than half a bowl later, he was beginning to feel full. His hand holding the bowl paused, and he looked at the board, frowning.

Feng Xiao arched a gleeful brow. "I won."

Cui Buqu remained impassive. "It's only the second round."

In that case, the final round would be the decisive one. These were men who spent their days flirting with danger, crossing mountains of blades

and seas of flame. Countless rare treasures had passed through their hands, yet now, they were getting fired up over a tiny bet. Cui Buqu was determined to get his hands on those names, while Feng Xiao never lost any bet he wanted to win.

Tasks discharged, Ming Yue returned to watch the match. The moment he reached the courtyard entrance, he stopped in his tracks.

Not only had Feng Xiao lost his previous spiritedness, he now looked grave. He looked at Cui Buqu, then down at the game board. His expression shifted.

What happened?

Ming Yue looked at them in bafflement, wondering if he ought to step into the crossfire or stand aside and enjoy the show. He swiftly chose the latter. Ming Yue stared keenly at the board and watched as Cui Buqu's glass game piece crossed the finish line first.

Chief Cui won, Ming Yue thought to himself.

Feng Xiao had always been self-assured to the point of arrogance; he rarely suffered defeat. No wonder he seemed displeased.

"This isn't your first time playing shupu. You're far too comfortable with these little tricks." He snorted.

"Why do you say that?" Cui Buqu drawled, his fingers drumming against his porcelain bowl. His mood had lifted considerably.

Feng Xiao watched his fingers. If he'd known about this little tic earlier, perhaps he'd have had a better read on Cui Buqu's intentions during their previous debates. Well, it wasn't too late to start now.

"This is just a friendly game, yet you use such tricks? Don't you find it unbecoming, Daoist Master Cui?" Feng Xiao was somewhat incredulous.

"All's fair in love and war." The corners of Cui Buqu's eyes crinkled as he broke into a rare genuine smile. "Best two out of three, I believe you said. Since I won, I expect you'll keep your promise and hand me the names as soon as possible."

"One more game."

"I'm tired."

Of course Cui Buqu wouldn’t give Feng Xiao the chance to turn things around. He rose languidly and walked back to his room to rest.

At last Ming Yue approached. He eyed Feng Xiao, who sat with one leg crossed smugly over the other, waving his fan. It was as if a peacock’s vibrant tail was poised behind him, ready to unfurl at any moment. “You lost to him on purpose?” Ming Yue asked.

Feng Xiao yawned. “When you want something from someone, you first need to offer something in exchange. Understand?”

“I don’t.”

“That’s why I’m number two and you’re number three.”

The corner of Ming Yue’s mouth jumped. “Cui Buqu is a clever man. Don’t you think he knows you meant to lose?”

“So what if he does?”

“If he knows and played along anyway, then he’s unconcerned with your intentions and only cares about the list of names. Sir”—at this point, Ming Yue shot him a sympathetic glance—“I don’t know what you want from Cui Buqu, but it’s clear he doesn’t care for your plans at all.”

Feng Xiao’s fan froze mid-wave, and he stared at Ming Yue. “Lao-San,” he said, narrowing his eyes in suspicion, “why do I feel you’ve suddenly gotten a bit smarter? You’re not an impostor from the Thirteen Floors of Yunhai, are you?”

Ming Yue didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. “It’s called an objective observation,” he replied. “Which I can make, because I have no horse in this race. You always look down on others; even the Prince of Jin is no exception. It’s rare for you to show any vulnerability, even for the sake of your schemes.”

“Speaking of the Prince of Jin,” said Feng Xiao. “Since Yuxiu earned his trust, there’s a chance others from the Thirteen Floors may be loitering around the prince and his family. The matter I asked you to look into—how did it go?”

At the change of subject, Ming Yue sobered. He shook his head. “The crown prince seems to be in the clear. But it’s not easy for the Jiejian Bureau to intervene in palace affairs. The Zuoyue Bureau must also be

doing their own investigations. The empress places significant trust in Cui Buqu; he may have already uncovered something. You seem to be spending more time together these days—you should ask him."

"I did. After the incident with Yuxiu, the empress ordered a thorough investigation of the palace. They turned up a few suspicious individuals, but nothing connected to the Thirteen Floors of Yunhai. If we take an optimistic view, Xiao Lü's reach doesn't extend as far as we feared. But if we look at it pessimistically, he has entrenched his pieces so deeply that locating them will take time. Either way, there's someone I need you to keep an eye on once we return to the capital."

"Who?"

Feng Xiao didn't keep him in suspense: "Princess Leping."

Understanding dawned on Ming Yue. "You suspect some rebels evaded capture after the thousand-lantern banquet—you think they're still lurking around her?"

"Whether they are or not," Feng Xiao said evenly, "we can't relax our surveillance of the princess's residence. Both inside and out."

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The moon waxed and then waned. Qixi had long passed, and the Mid-Autumn Festival was drawing near.

Since the day Great Sui was founded, the emperor had chosen to disregard the old systems of the previous dynasty, prioritizing change over convenience. He implemented sweeping reforms: relocating the capital, enacting new laws, and reducing taxes to stimulate national recovery. Though everyone anticipated an eventual war between Sui and the Khaganate, the prices of everyday goods—firewood, rice, salt, and oil—weighed more heavily than any faraway threat on the minds of most. As the new dynasty and its policies took effect, the people found themselves with more wealth in their pockets. The common folk had more to spend on food and festivities, and the streets and alleys bustled with their preparations.

But among the officials and nobles, the prevailing topic was not the upcoming Mid-Autumn Festival, but Princess Lanling and County Duchess Yuwen.

Princess Lanling had always been meek and obedient to her parents. But rumors now swirled that when the empress had brought up the subject of marriage, she'd boldly requested to marry Feng Xiao, the deputy chief of the Jiejian Bureau. While it was no secret that Princess Lanling had taken a fancy to Feng Xiao, no one thought she'd dare to propose marrying him to the empress herself. Coincidentally, Feng-er had recently returned to the capital. Many were eagerly awaiting his response, hoping for a bit of scandalous entertainment.

As for Duchess Yuwen, the chatter about her was, unsurprisingly, of a similar nature. The duchess was of marrying age, but her situation was more complicated than that of Princess Lanling. Her mother, Princess Leping, was determined to find her daughter the perfect husband, yet she disdained all the suitors willing to marry Yuwen Eying, considering them beneath the girl. At the same time, the few men who met her stringent criteria had no interest in marrying her daughter.

As a result, Princess Leping visited the palace often, turning to her supremely capable mother for help. Empress Dugu was happy to see her daughter more frequently. She had many children, but it was her eldest daughter who received the lion's share of her love and attention.

It was to her mother's great sadness that, despite her lofty status, Princess Leping's life had been a difficult one. She'd lost her husband and had no sons; her only child was her daughter, Yuwen Eying. Princess Leping's parents would eventually pass away and leave her; once her daughter married, the only person she could rely on would be her brother, the future emperor.

Contemplating her daughter's circumstances, Empress Dugu's heart swelled with compassion. Princess Leping laid her head on her mother's lap, and Empress Dugu stroked the raven hair beneath her fingers, anguish washing over her at the strands of gray mingled within the black. Like any mother, she loved her children dearly. Even as she held the title of one of the Two Saints, even as she immersed herself in government affairs, she remained a mother—and in this case, one burdened by a guilty conscience.

“I’ve heard you’ve practically gone cross-eyed trying to pick a husband for Eying. There are so many eligible men out there—have none managed to catch your eye?” she said lightly. “Could it be you’re like A-Wu, hoping for Feng Xiao as your son-in-law?”

Princess Leping shifted her head on her mother’s lap. She was no longer a young woman, and the loveliness of her face couldn’t conceal the lines at the corners of her eyes. Yet no matter her age, in front of her mother, she remained the sweet girl who’d forever revered her parents. This was something time would never change.

Princess Leping smiled. “Feng-erlang is a fine man. He’s a peerless martial artist and a talented official—I don’t blame A-Wu for being drawn to him. If I were ten years younger, perhaps I’d feel the same!”

The A-Wu they discussed was of course none other than Princess Lanling, Yang A-Wu, who’d fallen hopelessly in love with the deputy chief of the Jiejian Bureau.

The empress smiled back. “Unfilial daughter! How can you call yourself old in front of your mother? You’re young yet, and the eldest princess of this dynasty. If you’ve found a good man, simply tell your father and me. Why suffer so?”

Princess Leping’s expression darkened, but she remained silent.

“If you don’t wish to remain a widow,” Empress Dugu said evenly, “you ought to seek a talented consort who can stand openly by your side. Carry on like this, and sycophants will flock to you, hoping to use you as a stepping stone for their own rise. You’ll face more incidents like the one at the thousand-lantern banquet.”

Abruptly, the princess dropped to her knees. “Mother! That incident was my fault—I endangered both the crown prince and the Prince of Jin. If anything should happen to them, I couldn’t atone even with a thousand deaths! I promise, it will never happen again!”

The empress sighed and reached down to help her up. “I don’t blame you, and neither does your father. You are too hard on yourself. Yuwen Yun is long gone; you owe him nothing, and there’s no need to remain a widow for him. Consider this: If your new husband belongs to one of the seven

great families, his status will overshadow that of Eying's father. Over time, people will forget; they will no longer bring it up."

"Mother! Lately I keep thinking. If only I hadn't married Yuwen Yun, how wonderful everything could have been!" Princess Leping fell into her lap again and sobbed quietly.

Empress Dugu was harsh and imperious, while her eldest daughter was soft and meek. The two couldn't have made a greater contrast. Even so, the empress had an endless well of patience for the eldest princess. "Silly child, the past is behind us; there's no need to dwell on it. If you don't wish to remarry, I won't force you. But you've looked at so many talented men for Eying. Don't you have any favorites?"

Princess Leping shook her head. "Everyone is lacking. Eying… She's too naive, easily swayed by others. I just want her to be safe, happy, and carefree for the rest of her life."

Empress Dugu mulled this over. "In that case, her husband must be clever and powerful, someone who can protect her. Here's a thought—what about Cui Buqu?"

Princess Leping's head jerked up in shock.

Back to the light, Empress Dugu looked down at her, expression difficult to discern.

Chapter 129

IN HER HEART of hearts, Princess Leping indeed resented her situation. But showing it would only create trouble, and such trouble was beyond her power to navigate. Yang Lihua might be Princess Leping, a cherished daughter of the heavens, but she remained fragile in the presence of people who could truly crush her. When she was with the empress, she kept her resentment concealed, buried deep within her breast.

But now her pulse raced with terror as she stared at her mother. Her blood pounded in her ears like a war drum, her heart tightening with each and every beat. For a moment, she thought the empress had seen everything she had tried to keep hidden.

Trembling, she suddenly remembered that the woman before her was not merely her mother, but the empress of a nation—a woman as resolute and decisive as her father.

“Mother.” Princess Leping softened her voice, choosing her words carefully. “I understand you’ve always placed great trust in Cui-xiansheng, or he’d never have risen to lead the Zuoyue Bureau at such a young age.”

Empress Dugu patted her hand. “You have it backward. He didn’t ascend to lead the Zuoyue Bureau because I trust him. It was his own abilities that propelled him there.”

“Yes!” Princess Leping began to panic; she couldn’t help raising her voice. “But he’s in very poor health! Mother, Eying is your own granddaughter. Could you bear to see her widowed so soon after her marriage?”

Empress Dugu remained unfazed. “It’s true that Cui Buqu has been unwell since birth, but his life is in no danger. You worry too much. Eying is an innocent child, a dreamer, but her circumstances are unique. Both of you wish for a peaceful life, but there are scoundrels lurking everywhere, waiting to take advantage of you. With Cui Buqu around, I would feel more at ease.”

Princess Leping's face was ashen. She'd thought Empress Dugu was merely testing her. Did she truly wish to betroth Yuwen Eying to Cui Buqu?

Empress Dugu watched her, waiting for an answer—or perhaps trying to glean one from her daughter's expression.

No matter how loving their relationship, mother and daughter were not equals. Their familial affection could never overcome the imbalance of power between them, nor bridge the insurmountable chasm it'd created. Princess Leping—Yang Lihua—had never grasped this truth so clearly as she did today.

"I have only this one daughter!" Tears streamed down the princess's face as grievances crowded her heart. She burst into sobs. "Mother, please. I promise Eying will be safe. I'll keep a close eye on her; no scoundrels will take advantage of her!"

But this time, Empress Dugu didn't stroke her hair, nor offer any reassuring words. Princess Leping's heart sank.

"Lihua, you must remember. Your surname is Yang, not Yuwen. And as for Eying, despite her surname, the Yuwen family cannot protect her," she heard the empress say.

"Yes, Mother." The princess sank into a deep bow.

The empress extended a hand to help her up, but her next words brought the princess no joy at all. "If he was able to fully recover his health, would you still oppose this marriage so? Other than his illnesses, everything about Cui Buqu is exemplary."

Princess Leping's heart juddered. She gritted her teeth, struggling to withstand the gentle, suffocating gaze above her. It had always been so. Ever since she was a child, she had no power to resist her mother's decisions. Her mind raced; countless thoughts flashed by like darting shadows. After mustering half a lifetime's worth of courage, Princess Leping finally managed to utter two words: "I understand."

"Well now, Eying is still young. I won't say any more on it today. Look how nervous you've made yourself. Go wipe your tears before leaving the palace." Empress Dugu's voice was soft. Although she didn't appear displeased with her daughter, neither had she given her a definite answer.

Clearly, she hadn’t given up on her desire to wed Yuwen Eying to Cui Buqu.

Princess Leping staggered to her feet and allowed the servants to guide her out of the palace, her steps as unsteady as if she was walking on clouds. Even from the back, she appeared dazed.

Empress Dugu let out a quiet sigh. “Come out, Cui-xiansheng.”

A man emerged from around the corner. His face was pale and drawn, his steps slow.

“You saw it too. Lihua is naturally meek; she doesn’t seem to me like a woman capable of holding sway over the Thirteen Floors of Yunhai. I tested her just as you asked. If she was truly guilty of what you suspect, she would have submitted to the betrothal rather than protesting so vigorously.”

Cui Buqu nodded. “The eldest princess doesn’t look the type, it’s true—but please refrain from telling her any of this for now. Once she returns home, she will undoubtedly share what happened today with those closest to her. If there are any unsavory individuals in her company who attempt to use this knowledge, we will address them when the time comes. The enemy has gone to ground after the incident on Mount Tiannan, and we have yet to uncover any traces. We too should remain quiet and wait for their next move.”

Empress Dugu smiled without mirth. “I never imagined I’d need to use the tactics I reserve for outsiders on my own daughter. If I’d known it would come to this, I wouldn’t have let her marry into the palace in the first place.”

Cui Buqu’s expression remained placid. He made no reply, but the empress wasn’t seeking one. After all, had Princess Leping not become the former empress, Yang Jian would never have become a relative of the royal family, and would have had no opportunity to attain his own throne. Even if time could be turned back, they’d likely still have married their daughter to Yuwen Yun.

Two hours later, Cui Buqu left the palace carrying some valuable herbs Empress Dugu had gifted him. Qiao Xian, waiting impatiently at the gates, turned to greet him, then froze when she saw him accompanied by an unfamiliar man.

The baby-faced general behind Cui Buqu cupped his hands. “Guan Shanhai—Sima General of the Right Guard. When Her Majesty learned of Cui Buqu’s perilous experience on Mount Tiannan, she became concerned that the Zuoyue Bureau lacked sufficient manpower. Her Majesty has ordered me to accompany him from now on.”

Accompanying Cui Buqu had always been Qiao Xian’s duty. How had a simple trip to the palace landed her with new competition? She looked back at him with instant hostility.

Guan Shanhai had no interest in squabbling with a jealous woman. To him, it was a humiliation to be reduced from a Sima of the Right Guard, a member of the imperial army, to a mere bodyguard. Cui Buqu might enjoy the royal couple’s favor, but the task of guarding an ailing man brought Guan Shanhai little satisfaction. He’d much rather have been on the battlefield, slaughtering enemies.

Cui Buqu had no interest in explaining the situation to Qiao Xian at the palace gates, nor in mediating a conflict between old and new personnel. He stepped into the carriage, his expression thoughtful and distant. It was clear he was deep in contemplation and not to be disturbed.

Guan Shanhai didn’t follow Cui Buqu inside and attempt to ingratiate himself. Instead, he climbed up with the coachman. Unable to restrain herself a moment longer, Qiao Xian leapt up to join Cui Buqu in the carriage.

“Lord Chief, why did the empress suddenly send someone to accompany you? Could it be…” Her low voice dropped even lower. “Surveillance?”

Cui Buqu shook his head. “Don’t overthink it. The Zuoyue Bureau has always been short-staffed. The moment official business arises, all of you run yourselves ragged. If I’d had Guan Shanhai with me on the trip to Mount Tiannan, perhaps I’d have captured Ning Shewo.”

“Then it’s all due to my incompetence,” said Qiao Xian.

Cui Buqu’s brow furrowed slightly. “Qiao Xian,” he said.

Qiao Xian raised her head and looked at him blankly.

“You worry too much for my safety and not enough for yourself. It’s never been my intention for you to play the role of my personal maid or bodyguard. Do you understand?”

Qiao Xian answered him with silence—her usual way of expressing dissent. He had always been more lenient with her than other members of the Zuoyue Bureau, but this time, he had no plans to indulge her.

The Zuoyue Bureau was overseen by two deputy chiefs: Zhangsun Bodhi, who handled external affairs, and Song Liangchen, who handled internal. Below them were the Zuoyue guards, who diligently followed their commands. Qiao Xian frequently accompanied Cui Buqu, leading many to perceive her as merely his bodyguard. But Cui Buqu didn’t wish for her to be confined to his side forever. Qiao Xian belonged to the wider world; if she chose to roam the jianghu, she was skilled enough to carve out a place for herself. There was no reason she should stay in Cui Buqu’s shadow.

Qiao Xian remained utterly silent, her expression one of deep hurt. Cui Buqu had been unmoved by Princess Leping’s sobs, yet now, he extended a hand and gently patted Qiao Xian’s head. She shifted subtly under his hand, as if nuzzling her head against his palm. There was nothing suggestive in it; rather, she resembled a small animal seeking comfort.

“How many years have we known each other?” Cui Buqu asked.

“Four,” Qiao Xian said dully. She still remembered their meeting clearly. It had been a year before the Zuoyue Bureau was established.

Cui Buqu’s tone was gentle. “It’s time for you to gain some independence.”

“Your lordship…don’t go so far away again, all right?” Only in front of Cui Buqu did she remove her cold, hard shell. Her tone, which could only be described as pleading, was one no one else had ever heard. “If I’m not with you, who will look after your health?”

“That won’t be a problem. I’ll bring the medicine you gave me. Besides, there’s Guan Shanhai now, and…” Cui Buqu stopped. He didn’t say Feng Xiao’s name.

That Feng bastard never missed a chance to make life difficult for him, but he couldn’t deny they worked well together when it mattered most.

If Feng Xiao hadn’t been on Mount Tiannan with him—if Qiao Xian or Zhangsun had been there instead—they might not have made it out alive.

Qiao Xian froze as she guessed the name he’d left unsaid, and a look of disbelief crossed her face. She quickly dropped her head, hiding her expression from Cui Buqu, and listened to his next order without looking up.

“Go to the Jiejian Bureau and ask Feng Xiao about those names.”

Qiao Xian knew at once what he was referring to—the prize Cui Buqu had won in a bet with Feng Xiao at the foot of Mount Tiannan. Feng Xiao owed him a list of the names and details of all government officials at the provincial level and below. Yet since returning to the capital, whenever the Zuoyue Bureau sent someone to ask after the list, they received the same answer: *The Zuoyue Bureau chief must come in person.*

Feng Xiao seemed confident Cui Buqu would eventually yield. He kept his doors wide open and acted completely unconcerned, dangling the lure and waiting for the fish to bite. But Cui Buqu remained resolute, refusing to go himself. They were at a stalemate.

“What if he still won’t hand it over?” Qiao Xian asked.

Cui Buqu snorted lightly. “If you show up, he’ll think I’m getting impatient. Even if he refuses to hand it over, he’s sure to attempt a trick or two. As soon as he does, I’ll turn the tables on him and force him to cough up what he owes me.”

His tone wasn’t one reserved for an enemy, but a familiar old adversary. As the saying went, *Know your enemy and know yourself.* Cui Buqu made it sound like they were friends and rivals both. They had only taken a trip to Boling, yet Qiao Xian realized their relationship had changed completely.

Chapter 130

FENG XIAO WAS PAINTING when Qiao Xian arrived.

He was entirely focused, smiling faintly as he moved the brush across the paper. It seemed he was in high spirits.

Qiao Xian grudgingly bowed in greeting. “Qiao Xian of the Zuoyue guard greets the deputy chief.”

Feng Xiao didn’t raise his head nor pause in his strokes. Although Qiao Xian didn’t have a clear view of the painting, she saw that Feng Xiao’s smile seemed to flow through the brush tip and onto the rattan paper on the desk, a beauty painting beneath the balmy autumn sun. Qiao Xiao found this man irritating beyond measure, but she had to admit it was a stunning scene.

All that loveliness was shattered the moment Feng Xiao spoke. “It appears Cui Buqu still refuses to come himself.”

“This humble subordinate has come on the chief’s order to pick up something owed to the Zuoyue Bureau. I ask the deputy chief to please accept his loss.”

Feng Xiao ignored her icy gaze. “The bet was between me and Cui Buqu,” he said, all smiles. “If he wants the list of names, he may pick them up himself. I won’t acknowledge anyone else. Besides—” He paused a moment, setting down the brush and studying the completed painting before looking back up at Qiao Xian. “Cui Buqu alone is qualified to call himself my equal. You call yourself humble, but your tone suggests otherwise—you don’t sound like a subordinate in the slightest. Does Cui Buqu keep you around under the delusion that your attitude will help relieve his burdens?”

At Qiao Xian’s stunned expression, Feng Xiao’s lips curled in a faintly malicious smile. “You know your way around disguises, and you know some medicine as well. But in the Jiejian Bureau, people like you are replaceable. If I offered one of my people to Cui Buqu, would he accept them? Would they take your place?”

Anger surged in Qiao Xian’s heart. She wanted to retort, but by the time the words were on her tongue, she’d decided there was no point arguing. In the end, she merely said coldly: “I’m afraid I must disappoint you. The palace has already sent us an attendant to serve as the lord chief’s new bodyguard.”

“Then you’ve been set aside?” asked Feng Xiao in surprise.

Qiao Xian pressed her lips together and said nothing.

Moments later, Pei Jingzhe watched Qiao Xian’s back as she furiously stalked out. He couldn’t stop himself from asking, “Sir, if Cui Buqu really comes, do we give him the list?”

Feng Xiao arched a brow. “If he’s willing to yield, why shouldn’t we give it to him?”

“That list contains secret information on officials of all ranks. How much time and effort did it take the Jiejian Bureau to create that list in the first place? And you’re willing to just give it away?”

Feng Xiao smiled. “You don’t understand Cui Buqu. If he chooses to appear in person, he’ll come prepared to make a trade. You know that list is worth far more than a game of shupu, so how could Cui Buqu not? He never expected me to hand it over without a fight. If he hasn’t come, it’s only because he doesn’t think the Zuoyue Bureau has anything that will impress me.”

Pei Jingzhe’s confusion multiplied. “Then are you hoping he comes, or that he doesn’t?”

Instead of answering his question, Feng Xiao said, “Go find out who the empress assigned to him.”

She hadn’t done it secretly, so finding out should be a simple matter. Pei Jingzhe acknowledged the order and left.

He returned within the hour. “Sir. It’s the Sima General of the Right Guard, Guan Shanhai. Three generations of his family have served in the army, and Guan Shanhai has proven himself a skilled wielder of the spear on the battlefield. He’s expected to succeed the commanding general of the Right Guard within the capital in the future. That the empress assigned him to the Zuoyue Bureau shows how much she values them.”

Feng Xiao sneered. “On the battlefield, a soldier is up against thousands of opponents. His strength lies in breaking through enemy lines—these aren’t the skills of a bodyguard. Guan Shanhai has enjoyed a steady stream of promotions; his career has been smooth sailing, and his skills are the real thing. He must be an arrogant man. I imagine he’s unhappy at having been reassigned to the Zuoyue Bureau.”

With that, he stood to head out. Pei Jingzhe hurried after him. “Where are you going?”

Feng Xiao folded his hands behind his back. “To the Zuoyue Bureau, to watch the show,” he said languidly.

He made it sound like he was stepping out to visit a neighbor, but the Jiejian and Zuoyue Bureaus were nowhere near each other.

“But sir, you just said you’d wait for Cui Buqu to yield.”

“When the terrain won’t change for you, you must adapt to the terrain. The empress would never do such a thing without a reason. If she sent someone like Guan Shanhai, she must have some new task for Cui Buqu. Besides, showing up at his door and making him yield will have the same result.”

You call this making him yield? It’s clear you’re the one who can’t wait anymore! You’re going there to provoke him yourself, aren’t you?

Pei Jingzhe had interacted with Cui Buqu on several occasions. Though Cui Buqu knew no martial arts, his gaze always made Pei Jingzhe feel as if he was being stripped bare. He’d start feeling guilty even if he hadn’t done anything.

“Is the Zuoyue Bureau the reason you’re trying to get close to Cui Buqu?” he asked.

Feng Xiao chuckled. “What good is the Zuoyue Bureau without Cui Buqu?”

“But then, what’s so special about Cui Buqu?” Pei Jingzhe asked, puzzled.

Fanning himself, Feng Xiao strolled along, in no hurry. “That Cui fellow… His appearance is unremarkable. He’s moody, stingy, and vindictive, with a tongue as sharp as a knife. He takes a mile when you give

him an inch, hides his cunning beneath a harmless facade, and his mind is bursting with schemes. He's perpetually ill yet never wallows in self-pity, and he spends his days darting about trying to claim the credit for other people's work. If not for me, he'd have met his end a hundred times over in Boling Commandery and Mount Tiannan. So if you're asking what makes him special…I suppose he has a special love of courting death."

Pei Jingzhe was dumbfounded. He'd asked the question offhand, yet Feng Xiao had immediately started rambling. According to him, there was nothing good about Cui Buqu. But if that was so, why couldn't Deputy Chief Feng leave well enough alone?

When Cui Buqu was quiet, his lordship Feng-er made sure to send him a reminder. And when Cui Buqu did send someone, Feng-er kept him hanging, insisting he come himself.

Pei Jingzhe had no idea how the two of them had made it through their time in Boling without incident. Two tigers couldn't share a mountain. Logically, either Feng Xiao should have died of rage, or Cui Buqu should have perished from a beating—yet both had returned unscathed. Pei Jingzhe felt that something was odd here, but he was at a loss as to what it could be.

The Zuoyue Bureau was indeed much livelier with the addition of Guan Shanhai.

Everyone in the Zuoyue Bureau—especially those capable enough to work closely with Cui Buqu—had been with him for a long time. In turn, Cui Buqu placed great trust in them. Yet Guan Shanhai had practically fallen from the sky. Without doing anything to earn it, he was suddenly second only to Zhangsun and Song Liangchen. He outranked everyone else—including Qiao Xian. What was more, the empress herself had ordered it. Naturally, all eyes were on him, and whispers swirled through the bureau.

Qiao Xian stewed in unhappiness. Finally, she couldn't take it any longer. She gathered herself and publicly asked Guan Shanhai to spar. She had no idea that Guan Shanhai found this new arrangement demeaning. Though he hadn't voiced it, he, too, was dissatisfied; he readily agreed to Qiao Xian's request.

They agreed to spar on the Zuoyue Bureau's training grounds. The news spread like wildfire through the bureau, and soon, the field was packed full. Even Cui Buqu came to watch, looking on in astonishment.

Qiao Xian specialized in graceful swordplay, while Guan Shanhai's spear techniques were bold and powerful. From their martial arts to their experience, they were utterly incompatible, yet they had been thrown together by the Zuoyue Bureau.

The match began. Both combatants possessed strong wills, and their attacks were merciless. Qiao Xian floated over the training grounds in her white clothes, practically adrift on the breeze as her sword danced toward her opponent. Only the sharp-eyed noticed her toes tapping the ground as she landed and took off again. Her qinggong was stunning.

Qiao Xian didn't care what the spectators thought; she merely wanted to prove that she was more qualified to accompany Cui Buqu than the interloper Guan Shanhai.

Her sword qi sliced toward Guan Shanhai's face. With a flick of his wrist, his spear point jabbed out in a series of tight circles that surged forth one after the other to block Qiao Xian's offensive. His gaze was harsh and cold.

Sweep, jab, tap, pull—these were the four fundamental movements of the spear, and Guan Shanhai moved through them like breathing. His spear, Wenyue, transformed into a living thing as it punched toward his enemy with crushing force. The spearhead streaked through the air, leaving icy sparks in its wake. While the onlookers were still dazzled, it painted a second silvery arc that connected with the first to form the bright outline of the yin-yang symbol.

The first jab neutralized Qiao Xian's attack; the second drew in qi to cloak himself. The final jab switched from defense to offense—the spear stabbed toward Qiao Xian.

Beneath the blazing sun, Guan Shanhai's chiseled, bronzed features were intent, as if he were facing not Qiao Xian, but an army of thousands. He wove through the battlefield disregarding his enemies, his surroundings, his very life and death. Mountains toppled, seas overturned; the sun and moon rose and fell, the trees and bushes splintered. Spring bled into autumn. Against a host of a thousand, he alone was enough.

Qiao Xian realized his spear had caught her sword. The dazzling glare was inches from her, piercing toward her face. Bloodlust filled the air as she felt a sharp pain between her brows. Alarmed, Qiao Xian attempted

to leap back in retreat. But her sword was trapped; she couldn’t pull away. Even if she let go, the bloodlust was already upon her. There was nowhere to run, nowhere to hide.

In the next instant, twin blasts of air funneled toward them from opposite directions, each carrying a stone that targeted Guan Shanhai’s left and right shoulders. Guan Shanhai sprang up, avoiding the stones, then landed smoothly on the ground. With a twirl of his wrist, he drew back his spear.

Qiao Xian’s nerves were still singing. She fell to one knee, too ashamed to look at Cui Buqu. “This subordinate is incompetent. Please forgive me, Lord Chief!”

“All warriors experience both victory and defeat. But you should know where to draw the line when it comes to one of your own.”

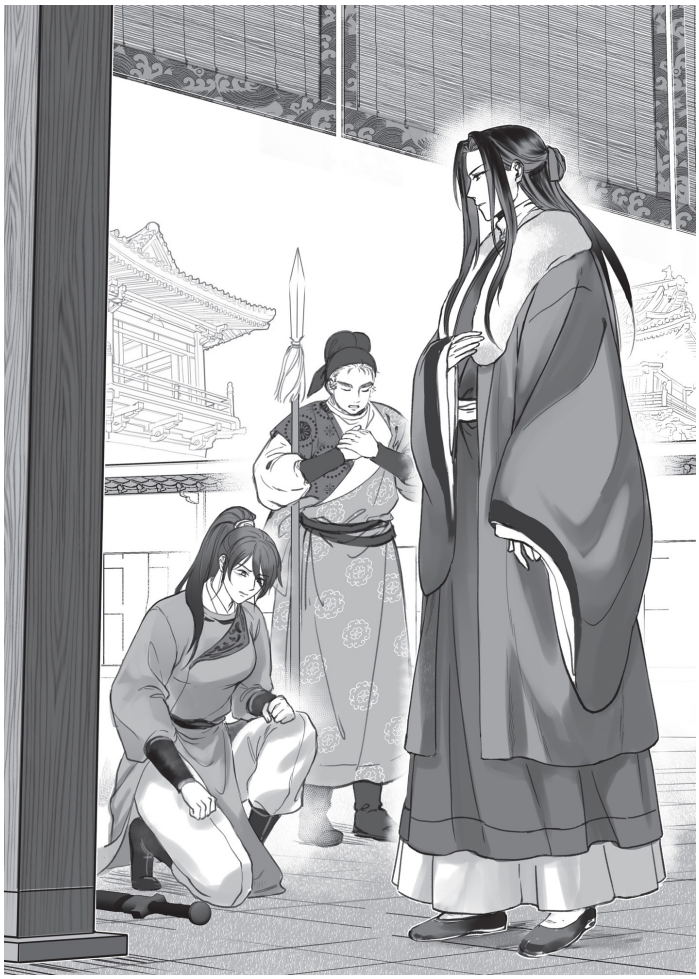
The first sentence was meant for Qiao Xian, but the second was aimed at Guan Shanhai.

Guan Shanhai pursed his lips and cupped his hands. “This subordinate understands his wrongdoings.”

Cui Buqu turned to the two men who’d just walked in. “Deputy Chief Feng, what ill wind has blown you here?”

There’d been two stones just now: one thrown by Zhangsun Bodhi, and the other by Feng Xiao.

“Ever since Mount Tiannan, Cui-langjun has shut himself away and refused all guests. Of course, I missed you dearly. We shared both joy and sorrow, life and death on that journey—how could I live with myself if I didn’t come see you?”



Cui Buqu sneered. “And here I wondered if Deputy Chief Feng finally remembered the bet he lost. Has your guilty conscience brought you here to pay your debt?”

The autumn wind churned up the sand of the training grounds and tossed the hems of their robes. Qiao Xian watched their confrontation. How had Feng Xiao walked into the Zuoyue Bureau with such ease? The Zuoyue guard should have done everything in their power to bar him entry; even if he overpowered them, they should have sprinted here to make their report.

But the guards had clearly done nothing of the sort; Feng Xiao had strolled onto the training grounds without any obstruction. She could only guess that Cui Buqu must have given the instruction in advance: As long as Feng Xiao came himself, there was no need to stop him.

These two had started off as bitter enemies. When had this begun, that the master of the Jiejian Bureau could saunter into the Zuoyue Bureau as if it was his own home?

Perhaps Feng Xiao guessed her thoughts because his smile widened.

Cui Buqu waved a hand, dispersing the crowd. He led Feng Xiao toward the pavilion in the middle of the bureau’s pond. “To what do we owe the pleasure, Deputy Chief Feng?”

He was bored and ran over to watch the excitement, Pei Jingzhe scoffed silently.

“I came to give you the list you asked for,” said Feng Xiao.

Cui Buqu halted in his steps and frowned. “Since when did you become so generous?”

Feng Xiao sighed. “I know the list is of great importance to you. You hope to use it to unearth all the spies the Thirteen Floors of Yunhai have planted within the imperial court. But how could I hand over something so valuable to just anyone? I waited for you to come to my doors and claim it, but you refused. What choice did I have except to make the trip myself? But if you doubt my sincerity, I’ll be on my way.”

He turned to leave. Without thinking, Cui Buqu reached out and grabbed his sleeve.

Instantly, Cui Buqu realized he'd revealed his eagerness and let go. But it was too late—a gleeful smile spread across Feng Xiao's face. "If you want it so much, why don't we sit and have a nice chat?"

Cui Buqu couldn't relax for a second around this man. He blew out a slow breath. "What do you want?"

Feng Xiao reached out and brushed his fingers across Cui Buqu's cheek. Cui Buqu tried to evade, but that hand swiftly grazed past his temple, reaching for the topknot on the back of his head and plucking the jade hairpin free. He waved the hairpin in front of Cui Buqu. "To stop you from defaulting on your debt," he said. "I have no choice but to take this hairpin as collateral."

He still remembered the way Cui Buqu had looked leaving the cave, his hair loose and his lips pale. There'd been a harsh coldness to him, like a lone pine growing at a cliff's edge.

Some other fastener was holding Cui Buqu's hair in place, because it didn't come loose upon losing the hairpin. *A pity,* Feng Xiao thought.

"I'm afraid Deputy Chief Feng's request will be too hard to fulfill," Cui Buqu said tonelessly.

"I haven't even said it yet. How do you know it'll be hard to fulfill?"

Cui Buqu's eyes lingered briefly on the jade hairpin in Feng Xiao's hand. He pressed his lips together and said nothing.

Clearly Cui Buqu was the one who wanted something from him, yet he refused to speak a single cajoling word. Feng Xiao considered this for a moment, running his fingers over the hairpin as if it was the bony knuckles of Cui Buqu's own hand.

"I want you." Under Cui Buqu's stunned gaze, he slowly finished his sentence. "To do me a favor. The list, in exchange for a gargantuan favor. Remember, Cui Buqu. You owe me."

Since the moment they'd met in Liugong City, they'd entangled ever tighter, neither enemies nor friends, impossible to separate for the rest of their lives.

Chapter 131

IN GUANGQIAN COUNTY, rain sheeted down.

Murkiness swirled above and below, impenetrable no matter where one looked. The sky and earth had merged into a single dark void, isolated from the rest of the world as they dissolved into one another. The water that poured from the clouds seemed inexhaustible, as if the heavens themselves were emptying basin after basin into the mortal realm. The flatlands transformed into swamp, and the river swelled to engulf the fields and their crops on its banks. On the horizon, the silhouettes of houses were a distant smudge.

Rong Qing waded through the mud, staggering as he went. All his surprise, fear, and confusion melted away at the scene before him, leaving only stupefaction.

Everything was done for. All the lives and families here had been thoroughly ruined.

The land beneath his feet should have been a prosperous village. Half a month ago, the village had been at its most bustling: farmers tramping in from the fields, children chasing each other as they played. Smoke wafted from every house, and passersby could smell the homely scents of cooking.

Yet now there was only water as far as the eye could see.

The torrential rain had swollen the river, and the waters overflowed their banks and rushed over the city and its outskirts. The rain refused to stop, growing heavier as the waters grew higher, until there was nowhere the floodwaters did not touch. Umbrellas became useless burdens in the face of the rain's wild laughter; it split their oilpaper canopies and streamed in through the cracks, drenching the people beneath.

Rong Qing shoved his attendant's hand holding his umbrella away, exposing himself to the rain. His head and face were soaked with rainwater, and he could barely open his eyes. He scrubbed at his face and squinted hard, as did everyone around him; they were all mourning the disaster, their tears indistinguishable from the rain streaming down their despairing faces.

“Sir!” the attendant called after Rong Qing, trying to keep pace with him as he walked off. But the rain swallowed his voice in an instant. He couldn’t even hear himself.

“Young man, stop Censor Rong, quickly! We can’t keep going in the rain. We won’t be able to get back!” an accompanying official roared with all their strength.

The attendant Xiao-Liu jerked his head around, looking out at the rain. When they’d arrived, most of the higher terrain had been visible, but in just a short time, even that had been submerged. The land around them was like a giant turtle slowly sinking, only the top of its shell still above the water. Frightened, he ran to catch up with Rong Qing. The man tripped over a submerged stone in his haste and fell, splashing muddy water all over his face.

Just ahead, Rong Qing found himself surrounded by water on all sides, trapped with no way forward or back. The only thing beside him was an old tree, similarly stranded, creaking ominously in the floodwaters and helpless to resist its fate.

Xiao-Liu ignored the pain in his knees and roared with all his might, “Quick! You must save my lord!”

The other officials looked at each other helplessly.

Freshly arrived from the capital, on hearing about the flood, Imperial Censor Rong Qing had insisted on leaving the safer highlands of the county to survey the region himself. Everyone had tried to dissuade him, to no avail—the magistrate of Guangqian County had no choice but to send the deputy magistrate and some officials to accompany their visitor. Yet to their horror, the floods had grown more severe during their expedition, the waters beginning to encroach on the high ground. Even the hillsides that had originally lain above the reach of the flood were swiftly engulfed.

A small flotilla of wooden buckets and clothes floated on the waves. A clump of black hair drifted among them, hinting at someone submerged below. Whether they were dead or alive was anyone’s guess.

The people here could barely save themselves; they’d never dare undertake the risk of saving others. Only Censor Rong Qing remained utterly fearless, apparently determined to push forward and save the person.

Now, however, he found himself stranded and waiting for a rescuer of his own. The deputy magistrate, Li Yan, had already silently cursed Rong Qing a couple thousand times.

Should they rescue him or not?

If they attempted a rescue, there was a good chance they'd be swept away as well. But if they left him to drown—Rong Qing was a censor from the imperial court. They were sure to be held responsible by the higher-ups if he perished here. Still, this was a natural disaster. The censor had a death wish; surely there was nothing they could do.

Li Yan thought furiously. He knew how to swim, but a choice as simple as taking a step forward or back here might decide his fate. If he disregarded his own safety to save the censor, perhaps he would drown instead. His face filled with panic at the thought. "What should we do? I'll go find someone to rescue Censor Rong!"

But who could possibly make it in time?

A rare flash of inspiration struck Xiao-Liu. He lunged forward and clutched at Li Yan, shouting at the top of his lungs, "Please save my lord! Let's take off our belts and tie our waists together, then hold each other's hands and walk over! We'll make it in time!"

Li Yan gritted his teeth. "Even a sturdy hemp rope would get washed away in this current, let alone a flimsy cloth belt!"

As they argued, the water climbed higher. The flood was lapping at Xiao-Liu's ankles, and the waters seemed poised to rise again. Rong Qing only had a tiny patch of dry ground left to stand on; he couldn't move an inch.

Xiao-Liu's voice was thick with terrified tears. "Please wait, sir. We're coming to save your lordship now!"

Li Yan looked at the three petty officials who'd accompanied them. The rain blurred their expressions. No one was willing to risk themselves to save an unfamiliar imperial censor, and Rong Qing had already earned their dislike—he'd been accusing and criticizing them since the moment he arrived. It was one thing if he wanted to get himself killed, but now he was putting them in danger too.

After a moment’s hesitation, Li Yan made his decision.

Yet in the next instant, a figure flew past, so swift he couldn’t even make out the color of their clothes through the heavy rain. That smudge of shadow landed on the shrinking patch where Rong Qing stood, grabbed Rong Qing by the shoulders and hoisted him up, then leapt off the old tree back to the others. This area was no drier, but at least there was a place to stand.

“Sir!” Xiao-Liu cried in shocked pleasure.

“What are you staring for? Get moving!” the rescuer said harshly. Now that he was closer, they could see he was clad in blue robes. His voice was somehow able to penetrate the curtain of rain because they could hear him clearly.

No one dared to tarry any longer. They rushed to higher ground, and Xiao-Liu staggered after them, supporting Rong Qing.

The heavens smiled on them—the rain gradually receded and the waters slowed their aggressive climb. Everyone finally had a chance to catch their breath as they crested the hill. They saw the gates of the city beckoning to them in the distance, and their hearts, which had been ready to leap out of their throats, settled back in their chests.

They’d long since lost their umbrellas, and everyone was so spattered with mud it was impossible to guess what colors they’d originally been wearing. It was all they could do to trudge forward one step at a time toward their destination.

Xiao-Liu’s legs went weak. He collapsed, dragging Rong Qing down with him. Their blue-clad rescuer snorted derisively, then gathered his strength and leapt away, bounding toward the city without looking back. The attendant would normally have complained, but at the moment he lacked the energy to say anything. Rong Qing’s state was little better.

Two hours later, everyone had finally straggled into the city. Rong Qing declined Deputy Magistrate Li Yan’s invitation to rest at the county office and returned to his lodgings at the relay station. Li Yan didn’t bother trying to persuade him. His attitude toward Rong Qing had cooled considerably: The enthusiasm with which he’d greeted him upon his arrival was nowhere to be found.

Soaking in the relay station's bathtub, Rong Qing washed the grime from his body. Then he wolfed down his meal, feeling his strength gradually return. In the quiet of the room, he realized how close he'd been to death. He was gripped by a lingering fear. The imperial court had dispatched him to Guangqian County to assess the flood damage and provide disaster relief. Dying like that would have been too great a humiliation.

Not long after, Xiao-Liu came to his room, hanging his head in apology. "Sir, I nearly failed to save you! Li Yan stalled on purpose!" he complained. "I'm telling you, he was about to push me into the water too and silence us both—he just wanted to absolve himself of the blame!"

Rong Qing didn't share the intensity of his grudge. "I insisted on going out in person," he said calmly. "His anger is understandable."

Xiao-Liu would have liked to say more, but instead he changed the subject. "That man who rescued you looked familiar."

"If I'm not wrong, he came with Cui Buqu."

"They're here already?" Xiao-Liu said in surprise. "Then will Cui… Will Cui-xiansheng blame you?"

He'd hardly finished his question when the porter tapped on the door with an invitation. It read: *Lord Cui cordially invites the censor to a meal at Yi'er Teahouse.*

Speak of the devil.

Rong Qing smiled thinly. "He saved my life. Even if he wishes to censure me, I must turn the other cheek."

This incident had begun ten days ago, when a report had arrived in the capital from Guangqian County. The county was suffering unexpectedly heavy rains, which caused the river to swell and overflow its banks. Much of the commandery had been swept up in the subsequent flood, and the seat of government, Guangqian County itself, had been hardest hit. Displaced, starving victims of the disaster were everywhere—they pleaded for the court to distribute grain as disaster relief.

Guangqian County suffered floods almost every year during the rainy season, but this year, the flooding was especially severe. The imperial court

agreed to send grain, and the emperor sent an imperial censor, Rong Qing, along with it to supervise the relief efforts.

Only on the day of his departure did Rong Qing learn that Cui Buqu, the reclusive chief of the Zuoyue Bureau, would join him on his journey. Cui Buqu held a missive personally issued by the empress; Rong Qing read it three times before confirming it was the genuine article. But this arrangement was too strange. According to rank, Cui Buqu should have been in charge of this assignment, yet the emperor hadn't said a word—instead, the order had come from the empress. When Rong Qing considered the duties of the Zuoyue Bureau, he couldn't help thinking the empress had sent their chief to keep an eye on him.

Rong Qing had been an official of the Sui court for some time, but he had never interacted with organizations like the Zuoyue and Jiejian Bureaus, which navigated the gray areas between righteousness and deception. In his eyes, Cui Buqu was nothing more than a lucky opportunist who'd managed to claw his way to the top—a sentiment shared by many in the Sui government. There was no issue when they stayed in their separate spheres, but now that they'd been asked to cooperate, Rong Qing felt deeply conflicted.

They'd first met in Baoqiao, on the outskirts of the capital. The encounter had been tense but not hostile, superficially courteous. Rong Qing had politely deferred to Cui Buqu for instructions, at which point Cui Buqu had explained that Rong Qing would be in charge on this mission, and was free to do as he saw fit.

Rong Qing took this as permission to drop his false obsequiousness. He had his carriage readied and set off for Guangqian Commandery without waiting for Cui Buqu. He was vehemently opposed to any interference from the Zuoyue Bureau on principle. He rushed to Guangqian Commandery, only to find the reality far more horrifying than he'd anticipated—he'd never before witnessed a disaster of such magnitude. As an imperial censor whose job it was to regulate other government agencies, Rong Qing was driven by a fervent desire to aid the populace. He tirelessly conducted surveys of the damages, even venturing out to the submerged villages themselves. Ignoring the dangers, he pressed on toward the outskirts of the county, where the flooding was at its worst. His reckless bravery had nearly

cost him his life. Yet to his surprise, Cui Buqu—whom he'd assumed to be still en route—had not only arrived, but sent someone out to rescue him.

When Rong Qing came to the teahouse and spotted Cui Buqu, his complexion even paler than it'd been a few days earlier in Baoqiao, he was overcome with shame. A hot flush crept up from his neck to his ears, and he was compelled to bow deeply before Cui Buqu. "Chief Cui, I can't thank you enough for saving my life."

Chapter 132

“CENSOR RONG. If Guan Shanhai hadn’t arrived when he did, were you prepared to die in the floodwaters?”

Rong Qing had abandoned his pride to thank him, yet not only did Cui Buqu offer no words of comfort, he went so far as to dress him down. Rong Qing’s face froze as Cui Buqu continued.

“Just think. Everyone would have soon known that Censor Rong arrived under orders to oversee the disaster efforts, yet he faltered before he’d even begun. They’d hear that the officials of Guangqian County were deep in mourning—that even the imperial censor has succumbed to the floods. This would serve as proof of the severity of the crisis, prompting the court to allot Guangqian County more relief grain. Yet you, Rong Qing, would be the first official of Sui to perish in such a dubious manner…” Cui Buqu paused, glancing at Rong Qing with a faint smirk. “Thus becoming the target of countless jokes.”

At that moment, Rong Qing finally realized what he disliked about the chief of the Zuoyue Bureau.

Whenever this man spoke to him, there was always another implication beneath his words. He sounded purely mocking now, yet he seemed to be insinuating something more—something Rong Qing couldn’t grasp. And if Rong Qing couldn’t figure it out himself, Cui Buqu certainly wouldn’t explain.

Some people had a natural affinity: They could share deep and meaningful conversations after meeting only briefly. But Rong Qing was sure that no matter how many times he met Cui Buqu, he’d never grow to like him. The man was too acerbic and too arrogant. Because the empress was fond of him, he looked down his nose at everyone around him.

Squashing his anger, Rong Qing replied, “I know it was impolite of me to leave first; I’ve displeased the lord chief. But this disaster is getting worse by the minute. If I arrived a day earlier, I’d be able to start my

investigations and reports a day earlier, and perhaps more people could be saved."

"So you rushed here and almost died," said Cui Buqu unceremoniously.

Rong Qing drew himself up. "If Chief Cui refuses to engage in a proper conversation, then I shall take my leave. I will assuredly repay you for saving my life, but while we are here in Guangqian, let us go our separate ways!"

The censor, too, was a stubborn man—he believed he was in the right, and was thus unwilling to endure more reproach.

Cui Buqu twitched a finger. Before Guan Shanhai realized what it meant, Qiao Xian was in motion: She drew her sword and held it to Rong Qing's neck.

"Let you go?" she said coldly.

Rong Qing was so furious he laughed. "So this is the fabled tyranny of the Zuoyue Bureau. You dare threaten imperial officials on a whim! It's small wonder everyone at court trembles at the mere mention of you. If Chief Cui desires the kind of power that sends people scurrying out of your way in fear, you've certainly achieved it!"

Cui Buqu was unfazed. "You nearly lost your life here, mere days after arriving. Once word gets out, the reputation of the Rong clan and all the hard-earned accomplishments of your father will be sullied by your actions."

Rong Qing was stunned. "You know my father?"

"Two years ago, your father, Rong Qi, assumed the position of magistrate of Mo County in You Province. When the Göktürks came to plunder the city, he remained fearless, refusing to surrender even in the face of death. Your father lost his life trying to hold the city gates before reinforcements reached him. In recognition of his unwavering loyalty, His Majesty promoted his son—you—to imperial censor."

At the mention of his father, most of Rong Qing's anger quietly fizzled out. He was silent for a moment. "To be honest, I've been doing

quite a bit of investigating here over the past few days. There's something strange happening in Guangqian County."

The rains that year had been exceptionally heavy. On Rong Qing's journey into the county, the downpour had persisted for ten days. He'd chosen one of the official roads that traversed higher terrain, steering clear of the river. Because the official road was only muddy and had yet to be submerged, it wasn't until he reached his destination that he grasped the full extent of the disaster.

Much of the city was submerged, and even the outskirts were challenging to navigate. Refugees streamed into the city, but capacity was limited; only a portion of them could be accommodated. County Magistrate Huang Lüe resettled as many as he could on the west side of the city and provided them with honest work. Each day they transported mud outside the city, constructing an embankment to combat the relentless advance of the flood. Rong Qing had gone to oversee the endeavor himself and found it commendable. The city had taken in the refugees and given them something to do, mitigating any potential unrest.

But while the disaster here in Guangqian County had been addressed, the cities in neighboring counties within the commandery hadn't such capable magistrates. The waters remained high, and the food within their storehouses was limited. Huang Lüe hoped Rong Qing would bring their plight to the court's attention so they could secure more relief grain.

Rong Qing wished to do exactly that, but as the censor sent by the court, he couldn't make his decision on the word of Huang Lüe alone. He'd sought out Deputy Magistrate Li Yan and made some private inquiries. Li Yan had stammered his way through his answers, making Rong Qing suspect he was hiding something. The censor had questioned him doggedly until Li Yan finally let something slip. It was in pursuit of this lead that Rong Qing had personally gone to the outskirts of the city for a look.

Abruptly, Rong Qing changed the subject. "Two nights ago, I received a strange painting."

He gestured for Xiao-Liu to fetch it over. The painting lacked any mounting and was simply rolled up; Rong Qing spread it out for them to see. At the center of the scene stood a granary, with countless people arranged around it, transporting grain away. On the left, a man in an

official’s robes sat with his servants flanking him, indulging in a feast as he surveyed the activity. The workers buzzed about in convincing urgency.

On the right side of the painting, near the granary, there was a small mountain of bodies: men and women, old and young, all sprawled on the ground in various unnatural postures. Their emaciated and jaundiced forms exuded agony. Some lay dead, while others clung precariously to life. One man was depicted gnawing on a severed limb, while nearby, a child missing an arm wailed as blood streamed across the ground.

When one looked only at the left and center of the painting, it appeared ordinary. But in combination with the right side, the effect was stomach-turning.

Rong Qing remembered the shock he’d had when he first laid eyes on the painting. He’d stared at it blankly, oblivious to the passage of time. Now, he watched as Cui Buqu cast it the briefest of glances. The man didn’t even blink.

As expected, a man of callous ambition, thought Rong Qing.

“This man.” Rong Qing tapped the official depicted eating on the left side of the painting. “Guangqian County was originally a first-tier county, which means their magistrate holds sixth-rank status. But after two years of natural disasters, the county was downgraded to second tier. Their magistrate, Huang Lüe, should have accordingly been demoted to the seventh rank. Since his debriefing before the court has yet to arrive, he retains his rank for the time being. The man in the painting is dressed in a scarlet minister’s robe devoid of ornamentation—although his face isn’t clearly visible, he can be none other than Huang Lüe.”

“So you believe someone sent you an anonymous report after learning of your arrival, suggesting that the county magistrate, Huang Lüe, has been embezzling grain and misreporting the disaster.”

“Correct.”

Rong Qing had been rattled, but he’d managed to follow his more rational instincts and refrain from immediately confronting Huang Lüe. Still, he couldn’t contain his restlessness, and had thus opted for a more indirect approach: He’d sought out other officials in Guangqian County in hopes of gleaning more information.

In truth it was this that had led to his conversation with Deputy Magistrate Li Yan, in which he'd witnessed the man's hesitant, stumbling answers. He'd also discovered that aside from Li Yan, several officials in Guangqian County were on poor terms with Huang Lüe. For example, County Lieutenant Wu Yi.

The three most important officials of Guangqian County—the magistrate, the deputy magistrate, and the county lieutenant—appeared united. But once Rong Qing scratched the surface, he found a game of deep intrigue beneath the bloodless flash of hostilities playing out on the surface.

There was only so much Rong Qing could uncover in one day—but the next night, he received a second painting.

It was on the same type of paper, with the same brush strokes. Rong Qing unrolled the second painting in front of Cui Buqu.

This time, there were no officials, yet the imagery was if anything more chilling. Amid the surging floodwaters, broken-off branches bobbed and corpses drifted. A black-haired head floated among them, gazing up at the sky, the expression on its face twisted in a silent wail of despair. In the distance lay the city, while in the foreground stood an old tree atop a hill. Beneath its outstretched limbs a man knelt in the mud, desperately digging with his bare hands. Several hands lay to the side, seemingly unearthed from the mire, their half-rotted flesh clinging to a dense thicket of white bone. It was a scene of approaching hell, where all trace of the buddhas had vanished.

Guan Shanhai had been observing quietly from the side, yet when he saw the painting, he let out an involuntary gasp. Rong Qing looked at him knowingly. "That's right—this is the tree where I was stranded today. It was this painting that compelled me to travel there myself, to see if it really existed."

He'd proven that the tree was real, but before he could start digging, the rain had caused the floodwaters to rise precipitously. Had Guan Shanhai not arrived at that moment, Rong Qing would likely be a wandering ghost.

"Now Chief Cui must understand that there was a reason behind my actions."

Cui Buqu ignored his aggrieved tone. “Then I assume you’re now even more suspicious of Huang Lüe?”

Rong Qing nodded. “Huang Lüe vehemently opposed my proposal to survey the lands outside the city, and County Lieutenant Wu was also notably absent. Instead, it was Li Yan, the deputy magistrate, who accompanied me. This practically proves there’s something suspicious about Huang Lüe.”

“Any reasonable person would object to leaving the city in the middle of a relentless rainstorm and a raging flood. Why didn’t you suspect Li Yan of ulterior motives? Perhaps he was taking the opportunity to silence you.”

Rong Qing paused, momentarily speechless. “Huang Lüe is the magistrate of Guangqian County. In almost every matter, he’s the one with the final say. What can a deputy magistrate like Li Yan do?”

“But it’s not just Guangqian County that’s affected. Most of the region is underwater. If I were in your position, I wouldn’t let two questionable paintings cloud my judgment.”

By now Rong Qing was convinced Cui Buqu disliked him, and that he was deliberately making his life difficult at every turn. He couldn’t be bothered trying to convince him—sometimes there was no point in further conversation. He changed the topic. “Tomorrow, Huang Lüe is hosting a banquet for all the wealthy families in the city to discuss relief efforts. He’s invited me as well. If Chief Cui refuses to believe me, come see for yourself who the heroes and villains are in this situation!”

With a final cold snort, Rong Qing walked away.

How convoluted, Guan Shanhai thought. It was as if a dense fog enveloped them, refusing all their efforts to clear it.

Guan Shanhai was accustomed to the straightforward conflicts of the battlefield. He had never encountered a situation with as many complexities as this one. To an uninformed observer, duties seemed clearly assigned across the various ranks of officials, yet closer inspection suggested things weren’t so simple. The court had disbursed a substantial amount of grain, but had it truly been needed? A feud was simmering between County Magistrate Huang and Deputy Magistrate Li—were they using Rong Qing?

Who had sent him those paintings, and why? Did someone wish to show him the truth, or were they trying to eliminate him?

The more Guan Shanhai pondered the situation, the more his head throbbed. Thank the heavens he was a military official; it wasn't his responsibility to deal with matters of this type. Still, he doubted Cui Buqu was so godlike he could effortlessly unravel the situation the instant he descended upon the county.

What he did know was that, in order to catch up with Rong Qing, Cui Buqu had to cut his planned travel time in half. His already fragile health seemed to have deteriorated further over the journey, yet he had never uttered a word of complaint.

Guan Shanhai was still unhappy about his new assignment, but his antipathy toward Cui Buqu had softened. He couldn't resist whispering, "How did you know Censor Rong was in danger?"

"Here, Rong Qing is a knife. Whoever wields him will use him to threaten others." Cui Buqu heaved a sigh. "Perhaps we'll soon witness a few of the many ways in which Rong Qing might meet his end."

Huh? Guan Shanhai was perplexed—he hadn't a clue what Cui Buqu meant.

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Rong Qing, too, was perplexed.

He was seated among the wealthy and renowned of the city, in the garden behind the county office. At County Magistrate Huang Lüe's invitation, everyone had come to the banquet to discuss the floods plaguing the county.

What baffled Rong Qing was that Cui Buqu, full of cutting sarcasm just the day before, was now sitting behind him as meekly as any sheep. He'd put on a false beard and introduced himself to the assembly as Cui-xiansheng. With this small change to his appearance and demeanor, he'd transformed himself into Rong Qing's very own close aide.

The members of the local literati and the merchants were terribly curious about this Imperial Censor Rong. Nearly everyone came up for some polite conversation or to ingratiate themselves. In the process, they inevitably noticed Cui Buqu behind him. A few curious souls directed a question or two his way, but he remained reserved and silent until Rong Qing stepped in to answer on his behalf.

Rong Qing knew Cui Buqu wished to conceal his identity, and that suited him perfectly. He had no desire for anyone to learn that the so-called aide at his shoulder was in fact a representative of the Zuoyue Bureau—if word got out, people might think the court didn't trust Rong Qing and had sent someone to monitor him.

But he hadn't anticipated Cui Buqu would be such a flawless actor. Watching him now, it was as though he was a different person entirely. He aimed to portray a reticent subordinate, and he truly didn't say a word. Even his gaze became gentle and harmless, his tone soft. The sharpness of the previous day was nowhere to be found.

As more guests arrived to greet him, Rong Qing had no more attention to spare for Cui Buqu's drastic transformation. He noted that the majority of those in attendance were young, many the eldest or second sons in their families. Very few patriarchs were present.

One young man was particularly eye-catching. He appeared around twenty, with conspicuous good looks. He was the fourteenth child in the Li family—a number from which he took his name, Li Shisi—and a distant relative of Deputy Magistrate Li himself. Rong Qing only now learned that Li Yan belonged to a well-off local clan—the Li family was apparently influential throughout all of Guangqian County.

Li Shisi had arrived with his cousin, the eldest son of the Li family. His companion was a stoic young man, and by contrast, Li Shisi was bursting with energy. He bounced around the gathering, toasting everyone he encountered, and approached Rong Qing several times, disregarding formalities and bombarding the censor with questions. His curiosity extended to Cui Buqu as well as he stood at Rong Qing's side.

"I hear Cui-xiansheng hails from the Southern dynasty. Why did you choose to come north rather than remaining an official there? What kind of

scenery does the Southern dynasty have? Is it truly filled with mountains, rivers, and flowers, with melodious songs playing wherever you go?”

Li Shisi pressed forward with each question, until he was a hairsbreadth from Cui Buqu. If it weren’t for his youthful charm and the curiosity shining on his face, he’d likely have been reprimanded already for his rudeness.

Cui Buqu gave him a bashful smile. “Not everyone who aspires to be an official can achieve this goal. I lack proficiency in both the pen and the sword, so I sought refuge with my relatives in the north. Fortunately, Censor Rong was kind enough to hire me and let me help him with copying paperwork. As for the scenery you mentioned… I believe there’s little difference between the mountains and rivers of the north and the south.”

“Goodness, Cui-xiansheng, your wrists are so slim and delicate!” Li Shisi’s eyes sparkled like he’d discovered some new treasure. He caught Cui Buqu’s wrist and refused to let go. “I’ve heard many men in the south are interested in other men, and some even have strange tastes, like a preference for older ones. I wonder, did you attract that type of attention—is that why you ran away to take refuge in the north?”

Chapter 133

CUI BUQU YANKED his wrist away but failed to win himself free. Everyone around them looked over, including Rong Qing.

The censor wore an expression of bemusement as he watched the young man's frivolous antics. Had Li Shisi been teasing a beautiful woman, Rong Qing would likely have already intervened. But Cui Buqu was wearing a beard and clearly a scholar—not to mention secretly an agent of the Zuoyue Bureau. Rong Qing silently recalled all the most terrifying rumors he'd heard about them, and one thought filled his mind: *This man really has some nerve.*

He gazed at Li Shisi in sympathy.

If Cui Buqu had come as himself, Li Shisi would by now have been sliced into several dozen pieces by his glare, then tossed into a sizzling wok. But at that moment, Cui Buqu was Cui-xiansheng, Rong Qing's personal aide—shy and taciturn. His behavior presented a character wholly different from the normal Cui Buqu.

On Cui-xiansheng's face was a mixture of shock and confusion, as if he'd received a grave and unexpected insult. "Unhand me!" he exclaimed.

He shook off the other man's grip and this time succeeded. But as Li Shisi released him, his fingers brushed lightly over Cui Buqu's palm, a playful and flirtatious gesture. It seemed this young man was quite experienced in the art of seduction, with no preference between men or women. He turned to Rong Qing. "Censor Rong, Cui-xiansheng and I share a natural rapport. Might you be willing to give him to me? Only name your price."

"Ridiculous. Cui-xiansheng is a human being, not an object," Rong Qing reproached him. "How can you say such a thing? Please leave us be!"

Rong Qing had come ready for a battle of wits and courage. He hadn't anticipated Li Shisi, and the young man's sudden appearance disrupted his momentum completely.

"Shisilang, mind your manners!"

The eldest son of the Li family bustled over, bowing to Rong Qing with a helpless expression. “Please forgive him, Censor Rong. My cousin was raised in Luoyang as the son of a widow. I’m afraid he’s become rather willful. Censor, you’re a generous man; please don’t let yourself be upset by the likes of him.”

Li Shisi’s face was the picture of unconcern. “What do you mean by willful, Cousin? This is called being true to myself! I’ve no interest in the singers here; I want this gentleman. He’s not Censor Rong’s wife, son, or father, so why can’t he give him to me? I’ll offer Cui-xiansheng some money and hire him as a scribe. Working for him or working for me—what difference is there?”

Rong Qing’s face darkened, and he raised his voice. “Did Magistrate Huang invite me here so I could witness such a farce?!”

Upon hearing the commotion, County Magistrate Huang Lüe hurried over with his escort. The Li family pulled Li Shisi back toward his seat, scolding him as they went.

Li Shisi muttered in dissatisfaction but tried nothing further after his cousin’s reprimand. He remained seated, his gaze wandering often toward Cui Buqu. When Cui Buqu glanced over, the young man responded with a cheerful grin.

Cui Buqu’s face remained blank. He looked away.

Though Rong Qing was a guest, he was also an envoy with the important position of imperial censor; County Magistrate Huang Lüe graciously gave him the seat of honor. Sitting at Rong Qing’s side, Cui Buqu was conveniently afforded a clear view of the entire venue.

The guests at the banquet were all local landlords from prominent families. As their wealth was in the land, the current disaster was a harsh blow. Once the floodwaters receded, their harvest would be ruined; they wouldn’t be able to collect taxes this year even if they wished to. They looked around with strained smiles, striving to keep their spirits up, but none were in any mood to enjoy a feast, even if the offerings had been mythical phoenix livers.

Huang Lüe took the seat below Rong Qing’s and raised his voice to be heard. “Under normal circumstances, we wouldn’t think of holding a

banquet with the flood ongoing. However, today we're graced with the presence of some esteemed scholars from our city. They were delighted to hear Censor Rong had come to assess the situation and offered to visit as soon as possible. This humble magistrate thought it best to summon all of them here at once so you could speak to them."

The censor was only here to make inquiries about the flooding and oversee the relief efforts. Supplying grain to the displaced victims would be his priority, lest the people's desperation turn into rebellion. In this respect, the affluent landowners had nothing to gain from the censor, so none of them were enthusiastic about the banquet. When Huang Lüe said they had offered to visit, they silently cursed him for distorting the truth to flatter their guest.

Rong Qing, on the other hand, was pleased by Huang Lüe's tact. If Huang Lüe hadn't taken the initiative to invite him, he'd have had to seek out all the prominent families in the county himself. His orders weren't simply to assess the situation, but also to ensure the grain had genuinely gone to disaster relief and that the landowners weren't colluding with the local officials to profit from the situation. He'd only recently been appointed censor, and this was his first official trip outside the capital. He'd consulted a senior official for guidance before he left and committed all his advice to memory.

In short, he was quite satisfied with Huang Lüe's performance. There were no delicacies on offer at tonight's banquet: The menu featured many ordinary vegetarian dishes, almost overly humble. Rong Qing even spotted a dish from his own hometown. Although he suspected Huang Lüe had arranged it to pander to him, it was only a simple plate of cold vegetables, so he enjoyed it without guilt.

Everyone took turns coming up to toast him, including Deputy Magistrate Li Yan and County Lieutenant Wu Yi. Rong Qing couldn't snub them, so in the spirit of the occasion, he took a few small sips of wine. Before the alcohol could affect him, he set down his cup and cleared his throat. "Although the imperial court has indeed allocated supplies for disaster relief, on my journey here I witnessed firsthand the raging floods that have submerged so many homes and fields. This disaster has displaced the common folk, leaving countless families devastated. While Magistrate Huang has permitted the victims to enter the city, the grain from the court

will feed them for less than two weeks. Even if the floods recede and rice is replanted, it won't be ready for harvest until next spring. Before that, your people here must endure a harsh winter."

All the guests present were well-educated; they didn't need him to elaborate. Everyone saw where he was going with this speech.

A middle-aged man surnamed Ding interrupted him. "We all greatly admire Censor Rong's compassion and concern for the people. When the flood arrived, the waters drowned our fields. My kind-hearted mother couldn't bear to see our tenant farmers starve, so she took food from our family's warehouses to feed them. Now we're left with nothing. The county has been completely devastated by this disaster—we're forced to import food to feed our own children. It's too expensive for my family to bear. I implore Censor Rong to think of a way to save us!"

Before coming, Rong Qing had heard that the Ding family were the largest landowners in the county, and that one of their number served as an official in court. As soon as the man spoke up, others hurried to voice their agreement.

"That's right. Our fields were submerged too!"

"We've no more food in our stores. We implore the censor to petition the court for more grain!"

"Censor Rong, your lordship must think of the people!"

Their cries poured in from every side, leaving Rong Qing dumbfounded. He'd come here tonight planning to ask the landlords to donate their surplus food, but instead, they'd seized their chance to bemoan their own poverty. Now it was too late to say what he'd intended.

County Magistrate Li made a timely interjection. "Everyone, Censor Rong arrived just a few days ago. He's here with us now to gain a better understanding of the situation. If you have any grievances, feel free to voice them. But after tonight, anyone found slandering the imperial court will face serious consequences."

While Huang Lüe had watched coolly from the sidelines, Li Yan had stepped up to speak. Rong Qing's fondness for Li Yan grew. Yet before he could respond, a familiar voice rang out:

“Deputy Magistrate Li, please forgive my humble self for disagreeing with your words!”

Rong Qing looked over and realized the speaker was none other than Li Shisi, the young man who’d teased Cui Buqu.

“There are countless rumors flying about at the moment. People are saying the court will send no more relief, and that we must fend for ourselves. We didn’t spread these tales! Our family used to provide our servants with three meals a day, but now we can only afford to give them two. Everyone is suffering hardships—our situation isn’t much better than the refugees. It’s only because we live in the city that our homes are still intact. But if the rain persists, it won’t be long before the flood engulfs the city as well, and then all of Guangqian County will face ruin. Should we stay here or leave while we still can? We implore Censor Rong to assist us in this decision!”

Li Shisi’s tone was flippant; he displayed a complete lack of restraint and little respect for Rong Qing. The young man was acting exactly like the spoiled, hedonistic son of a rich family.

Rong Qing’s expression darkened. “We’re all in the same boat and facing the same challenges, yet here you are talking about fleeing to save yourselves. On the battlefield, this kind of talk would destroy an army’s morale! I’ll tell you the truth: The contents of the court’s warehouses are limited. Many flood victims are at risk of starving and freezing to death during the oncoming winter. Aside from the fact that you’ll have no farmers, and thus no crops next year, discontent among the people will breed unrest. At that point, your family will be the one in trouble!”

Here it comes, the assembly thought. *After all that beating around the bush, Censor Rong finally got to the point. Of course he hopes to squeeze the landlords for food and money. But why would we relinquish these so easily? The court may still step in and spare us the trouble.*

Li Shisi spoke again, giving voice to what everyone was thinking. “You’re wrong, Censor Rong. If that happens, we can simply leave!”

The man named Ding sighed. “Censor Rong. Of course we wish to support our hometown. But while we possess the heart, we lack the means!”

Others chimed in as well. “That’s right! We can’t even save ourselves—how can we be expected to save others?”

“That’s enough!” Huang Lüe finally spoke. “Over the past two years, Guangqian Commandery has established a policy of donating food to the official granaries in return for tax reductions. Thanks to this, we could support ourselves in the face of small setbacks. Unfortunately, the current flooding is a major disaster. The imperial court has provided grain, but it also requires contributions from its citizens. As with the previous two years, we will continue to offer tax reductions for those who donate food. However, we need everyone’s input on what these reductions should look like. Let’s discuss this matter openly and share our ideas.”

Everyone exchanged glances, but it was the persistently annoying Li Shisi who spoke up once more. “Magistrate Huang, we’ve told you already. It’s not that we’re unwilling to donate—we simply don’t have food to spare. Even if the court waives a decade of taxes, we have nothing to contribute!”

Rong Qing felt tonight’s meal was one of the most miserable experiences of his life.

He’d thought he had a grasp on the situation in Guangqian County. Tonight, he’d planned to make a strong impression in his new role and maybe even show off in front of Cui Buqu, hoping to put a dent in that impressive aura. But he hadn’t anticipated the obstacles he faced at every turn. Not only were the landlords uncooperative, even the officials of Guangqian County displayed little enthusiasm for his cause.

Who had sent him those two anonymous paintings? Rong Qing had hoped to use the banquet to ferret out a clue or two, but the responses from the officials and landlords had put him on the back foot.

Cui Buqu had remained silent the entire time. *He’s probably laughing at this farce,* Rong Qing thought glumly. His spirits sank even lower, and without realizing it, he reached for his wine cup more frequently.

It was true Cui Buqu thought Rong Qing too inexperienced; he felt the man had been led around by the nose all night. But his attention wasn’t truly focused on him.

Li Shisi’s initial behavior had led him to suspect his new acquaintance was Feng Xiao in disguise. Changing one’s age and

appearance wasn’t particularly surprising—Qiao Xian could do it too. They themselves had engaged in a game of disguise back in the Western Khaganate. Li Shisi was flashy and ostentatious, just like Feng Xiao.

But when Li Shisi raised a toast to County Lieutenant Wu Yi, a spontaneous look of obsequiousness had crept over his face, and Cui Buqu’s confidence had faltered. Feng Xiao had never displayed such humility and submission toward anyone in Cui Buqu’s experience.

That Feng bastard acted careless and never took anything seriously, but deep down, he was immeasurably proud. He looked down on everyone who wasn’t him, so asking him to act humble or submissive toward anyone was an impossible task. Li Shisi was therefore merely Li Shisi. He couldn’t have anything to do with that Feng bastard.

Cui Buqu frowned and lowered his lashes. It was the first time he’d been confused about his own suspicions.

He had left the city without a word. Even if Feng-er noticed his absence, he couldn’t have located him so quickly, let alone chased after him and created an entirely new identity by the time Cui Buqu arrived. So why did Cui Buqu feel so full of doubts? Why did thoughts of Feng-er linger in his mind, no matter whom he encountered?

Chapter 134

WHILE CUI BUQU observed Li Shisi, he himself was being observed.

Most people's attention remained on Rong Qing, the star of tonight's gathering. Cui Buqu had kept a low profile, submersing himself in his role as a clerk who handled paperwork more often than people—a man who rarely made social appearances and was unfamiliar with such grand settings. The clerk he was playing had never been to a banquet like this. He felt at a loss, and somewhat shy. He spoke little, was reluctant to join any conversation, and was helpless in the face of harassment from a playboy like Li Shisi.

Rong Qing hadn't hurried to help his aide out of the awkward situation. The two seldom conversed, and their expressions demonstrated a clear distance. It seemed Rong Qing was not particularly close to his aide—perhaps he had no one competent around him and had been forced to hastily choose someone to fill the role.

Just as the rumors said, Censor Rong was new to his post and had only a superficial understanding of the situation he'd found himself in. In a place like Guangqian County, it was inevitable that he'd be played for a fool. Some people considered this information thoughtfully, while others relaxed and felt relieved.

Rong Qing noticed the sly gazes on him, but he couldn't exactly slam his hands on the table and leap up to confront the guests. It would only breed further contempt.

The wine in his cup smelled faintly of sweet grass; it was likely a local specialty. He downed a cup and savored the aftertaste. As he watched the wine rippling against the rim, his eyelids began to droop.

Cui Buqu would have watched coldly from the sidelines, but Cui-xiansheng was in Rong Qing's service; it'd be unusual if he didn't offer any advice. "My lord, you should drink a little less. County Magistrate Huang is watching you," he whispered.

“It’s none of your business!” Wine truly bolstered one’s courage. Rong Qing had initially been wary around Cui Buqu, but now he’d thrown caution to the wind.

Cui Buqu adopted a look of helplessness, then coughed a few times. His face was pale.

The maid serving the wine couldn’t resist bending down and whispering in his ear, “My lord, there’s some lime wine at the residence, which should help with intoxication—shall I fetch it?”

Cui Buqu looked up at the maid’s delicate features in surprise. The girl blushed faintly and lowered her head.

“Then I must trouble the lady.”

“It’s no trouble at all,” the maid quietly replied. Although this gentleman was on the older side, she found him gentle and considerate. She was a common girl working as a maid in the county office’s back courtyard, and in a couple of years she would be seeking a husband. If she could find one like Cui-xiansheng, who was older and understood how to care for others, wouldn’t that be perfect?

At that thought, the maid’s cheeks grew pinker still. “You can call me Ju-er,” she said hastily before going to fetch the wine.

Cui Buqu hadn’t anticipated that even as the frustrated aide of an imperial censor he would attract a bit of romance. But he had no time to ponder this because County Magistrate Huang was approaching with a cup in hand.

“Censor Rong has traveled a long way. I should have thrown a grand banquet to welcome you, but unfortunately, Guangqian County is struggling in these floods. This banquet is hardly worthy of you. I ask for your understanding, Censor Rong.”

Rong Qing slowly stood. His mind was still clear, although his hand holding the cup trembled slightly. “May I ask when Governor Yang will arrive?” he inquired, referring to Yang Yun, the local commandery governor.

Huang Lüe looked apologetic. “The whole commandery has been battered by the disaster, and Governor Yang is busy with official duties. I’ve

just been informed he won’t make it tonight.”

Rong Qing was instantly upset. One of the principal reasons he’d attended tonight’s banquet was because Huang Lüe had assured him Commandery Governor Yang would be present.

But he wasn’t.

Not only had he not shown up, he hadn’t even sent a deputy to make his excuses, but simply had a servant relay the message to Huang Lüe. It was an obvious slight.

From top to bottom, no one in Guangqian County took Rong Qing seriously as imperial censor, nor were they concerned in the least with what he might report to the emperor. Yang Yun was a royal relative, the emperor’s nephew, and had a good relationship with the crown prince, Yang Yong. He no doubt thought himself untouchable.

As it stood, Rong Qing couldn’t prove the officials of Guangqian County were derelict in their duties. They had diligently provided disaster relief to the flood victims, the granaries had been emptied, and since the waters outside the city had yet to recede, the county magistrate was working hard to shelter as many refugees as possible. If Rong Qing accused them of wrongdoing without evidence, he would be the one to face consequences.

Cui Buqu’s voice suddenly rang in his ears. “If I were you, I wouldn’t have come to the banquet tonight.”

Although annoyed, Rong Qing still couldn’t help pricking up his ears to listen.

“You have nothing on them, yet you want them to cough up their possessions. You might as well rob them in broad daylight; it’d be faster. It’s no surprise Yang Yun didn’t appear tonight. Before coming here, I sent my people to investigate. Although Guangqian County has always suffered from floods, previous years were not nearly so dramatic.”

Rong Qing’s heart stirred. He couldn’t stop himself from asking, “So in other words, within the last two years, they never reached the point of needing to donate grain for exemption from taxes. Are Yang Yun and Huang Lüe deceiving the emperor?”

Cui Buqu looked down at the banquet table, his expression unchanged. “From what I know, in the first year of the Kaihuang era, Guangqian harvested around three hundred tons of grain. Last year, it was a hundred and eighty tons. The imperial warehouses sent grain after this flood, yet Huang Lüe claims the county granaries are empty. Do you dare believe it?”

“So I wasn’t wrong!” Rong Qing murmured. “There’s definitely something fishy going on here!”

“Don’t alert the enemy before you need to,” said Cui Buqu. “Get to the bottom of everything first. What we need is proof of their guilt. If we have that, threatening them with their families, seizing them and killing them, sending heads rolling… That will all be on the table, and everything will fall neatly into place. It doesn’t matter if the guilty party is Yang Yun or Huang Lüe. If they try to make a scene, we’ll simply make a bigger one.”

His voice was very low, meant for Rong Qing’s ears alone. Though he spoke softly, a shiver ran through Rong Qing at the murderous intent behind Cui Buqu’s words, clearing his mind somewhat.

As expected of the Zuoyue Bureau chief, a man who could kill people without blinking. Rong Qing recalled the many rumors about Cui Buqu, most famous among them the recent incident at the thousand-lantern banquet, at which he’d brazenly confronted the most cherished of royal children, Princess Leping. Was there anyone he wouldn’t dare kill?

A chill raced down Rong Qing’s spine. He frowned. “Such ruthless methods will put innocents in harm’s way. We’re here to expose corruption, not unleash a massacre!”

Cui Buqu looked at him in astonishment. “May I ask, Censor Rong, how much corruption have you exposed so far?”

Rong Qing tamped down his anger. “Don’t try to provoke me. I’ll never do as you wish! If I did, what difference would there be between me, an imperial censor, and the thugs of the Zuoyue Bureau?”

Before the maid Ju-er could bring over the lime wine, the alcohol had gone to Rong Qing’s head. His exchange with Cui Buqu had drained the last of his clarity. He swayed and collapsed against the banquet table.

Cui Buqu shook him worriedly. “My lord! My lord!”

Deputy Magistrate Li Yan looked over and sighed. “Censor Rong is so distressed over our plight here. All his worries have left him more susceptible to the wine!”

Huang Lüe quickly ordered someone to take Rong Qing away to rest. Cui Buqu rose to follow when Huang Lüe glanced at him and smiled. “Cui-xiansheng, you’ve accompanied Censor Rong the past few days and have also been working hard. Tonight, take some time to relax! Censor Rong is our distinguished guest. Since your censor collapsed before the banquet ended, you should drink a few more cups on his behalf!”

Cui Buqu could scarcely refuse; he obediently drank two more cups. His cheeks were visibly flushed as he waved his hands and coughed. “I really can’t drink another drop; I truly can’t!”

Li Yan and several others laughed to see him shed his tidy appearance.

“Cui-xiansheng is so honest; tell him to drink, and he really drinks!”

“As the saying goes, the servant takes after the master!”

“But Cui-xiansheng appears much more generous than Censor Rong. I wonder if Censor Rong has any other plans for this trip?”

The seemingly innocent question came amid the barrage of jokes. Unable to hold his drink, Cui Buqu shook his head and propped his forehead in his hands. “I don’t know where my lord plans to go; wherever it is, he won’t take me along. He—he doesn’t trust me!”

Grievance and injustice filled Cui-xiansheng’s reddened eyes, which shimmered as though he were truly drunk.

Seeing that they wouldn’t be getting any information out of him, the crowd lost interest. Only Li Shisi, who was wandering about toasting everyone in sight, approached again, attempting to shove a full cup of wine into Cui Buqu’s hand.

When Cui Buqu tried to refuse, Li Shisi’s expression became serious. “What, Cui-xiansheng will drink wine from others, but not from me? Is the cup I gave you poisoned?”

Cui Buqu gazed back at him, his unfocused eyes brimming with guileless innocence.

Li Shisi laughed and grabbed Cui Buqu's hand, half-forcing him to tip the cup back. "Cui-xiansheng, if things aren't going well with Censor Rong, why not seek out greener pastures?"

"What…pastures?" Cui Buqu blinked sluggishly, as though he hadn't understood the question.

"Censor Rong is stubborn and inflexible; what benefit is there in following him? Cui-xiansheng must work to support himself, right? Censor Rong has only just arrived in Guangqian. He wants to make a splash, but he hasn't bothered to ask if anyone else is willing. He's a lamb who's not afraid of tigers. There's no need for you to cling to a piece of rotten wood and sink along with it. Why not take this opportunity to change employers?"

Cui Buqu frowned. "Sir, I've failed in my scholarly pursuits. I can only write and copy documents for a living; who would want me other than Censor Rong?"

"Our Li family is one of the county's most prominent clans, and I happen to need someone with your skills. Come with me, and you won't struggle to make ends meet like you do now. I'll pay you double what Censor Rong is offering!" Li Shisi said grandly.

Cui Buqu frowned and remained silent, as if unable to make a decision.

Li Shisi didn't mind waiting for a response. While his back was to the crowd drinking and chatting, he took the chance to discreetly run his fingers over the tender flesh of Cui Buqu's wrist. The rough sensation made Cui Buqu tremble, and his face, already flushed from the wine, went even redder.

Even if Cui-xiansheng were a complete and total fool, he'd have understood Li Shisi was flirting with him.

Seeing that he was getting angry, Li Shisi leaned in with a smile. "Cui-xiansheng, I really do like you—I'm genuinely thinking of your wellbeing. Your life under Censor Rong is too hard. In fact, your life might

even be in danger. Think about it carefully. Once you realize I'm right, simply go to the Xiangji Restaurant and mention my name. The owner knows how to contact me."

He drew closer again, and Cui Buqu leaned back slightly, out of his reach. "Li-langjun."

Li Shisi smirked. "Why be so distant? It would be better to drop the *jun*."

Cui Buqu coughed harshly; whether due to anger or illness, it was impossible to say.

"Li-langjun, might I ask…" Cui Buqu's voice was hoarse and melodious. "Do you happen to know a man with the surname Feng?"

Li Shisi thought maybe he'd misheard. "Feng?" he echoed in confusion. "I don't believe my family's known anyone with that surname for over eight generations. Why do you ask?"

"It seems I've mistaken you for someone else," Cui Buqu replied coolly. "You resemble him somewhat."

Li Shisi ran with the topic, laughing. "I didn't expect Cui-xiansheng to enjoy such games. All right, call me Feng Shisi when we meet in private!"

Cui Buqu shot to his feet. "Magistrate Huang, I fear the wine has done me in. Please allow me to take my leave."

Huang Lüe waved a magnanimous hand. "Ju-er, take Cui-xiansheng to rest."

Li Shisi didn't chase after Cui Buqu. He returned to his cousin, only to be scolded again. "Stop running around doing whatever you please! It's one thing to behave so preposterously when things are normal, but why torment Censor Rong's aide today?"

"I was just trying to probe for details about Censor Rong for you!" Li Shisi said sweetly. "He's the only aide Censor Rong brought; he must know something of his plans. If we make inroads with him, maybe we can drive Censor Rong away!"

The eldest son of the Li family snorted. "You're better off watching out for yourself. Large matters such as these aren't for you to interfere in."

Li Shisi flashed him an abashed smile and bowed his head under the rebuke. All of the audacity he'd displayed with Cui Buqu seemed to have vanished. "I'm only trying to help. Otherwise, Uncle will send me back to my hometown, right after I got chased out. How embarrassing that would be!"

"You—!" Exasperated, the Li family's eldest son shook his head at his cousin's failings.

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Rong Qing had a splitting headache. He opened bleary eyes and was startled to see a half-naked woman sleeping beside him. Panicked, he bent down to check his clothing, as tense as a chaste maiden.

"I thought Censor Rong was looking for a night of passion. Why does he look like a woman who's been abducted to a bandit's stronghold?"

Rong Qing's head jerked up.

A man stood by the door, his lips quirked in a half smile. It was none other than Cui Buqu, who had been drunk and stumbling just a short while ago.

Chapter 135

"I HAD SOME WINE…" Rong Qing trailed off. There was no need to elaborate.

Drinking created problems. He'd planned to get just a little tipsy, but he'd vastly overestimated his tolerance. The wine was sweet, so he hadn't worried overmuch. But after downing one cup after another, things had spiraled out of control; he'd passed out, oblivious to everything around him, and ended up in a honey trap.

Who knew how many truths he'd spilled while drunk?

Would Huang Lüe use this to threaten him? Rong Qing's mind raced. His face was ashen; he no longer cared whether Cui Buqu thought he was a fool.

He had come here to accurately assess the situation, not land himself in hot water. His career as an official was just beginning—he couldn't afford any missteps. No matter how beautiful the woman, Rong Qing believed he had the self-discipline to resist temptation. Yet now he'd gotten drunk and delivered himself straight into the enemy's hands.

"If not for me, you'd be drowning in the charms of a woman right now."

As Cui Buqu approached, Rong Qing felt a wave of guilt and instinctively shrank back. Yet in the next moment he realized what he'd done and his face burned with embarrassment. It suddenly dawned on him why he'd gone to such lengths to avoid Cui Buqu.

Cui-xiansheng's gaze was razor-sharp, as if there was nothing he couldn't see through. What left his mouth was mostly biting mockery—to him, Rong Qing's passionate enthusiasm was merely foolhardy courage. Everyone yearned to hear praise and desired to see beauty, and Rong Qing was no exception.

But this yearning had nearly led him to disaster. If Cui Buqu hadn't woken him, even if he sprouted eight mouths in the morning, they wouldn't

be enough to profess his innocence. Rong Qing steeled himself. “Thank you, Cui-xiansheng. I was careless,” he admitted.

Cui Buqu hadn’t the slightest interest in cowing Rong Qing. He didn’t bat an eye as Rong Qing attempted to get out of bed and put on his boots. “Lie down. You can’t leave.”

Huh? Rong Qing was momentarily stunned. But he soon understood: If he left now, he’d offend Huang Lüe’s pride and make it difficult to conduct any future investigations. He opened his mouth to speak, then hesitated and looked back at the woman in his bed. He couldn’t tell if she was asleep or merely pretending, which made conversation inconvenient.

Cui Buqu leaned forward and patted the woman’s cheek, his touch anything but gentle. “Wake up!”

The beauty woke in a daze and found two men looking down at her. She opened her mouth to scream, but Cui Buqu was faster. He clapped one hand over her mouth and struck the back of her neck with the other. The woman went limp and collapsed. Now she was unconscious for certain.

Rong Qing was speechless. He’d expect nothing less of the notorious Zuoyue Bureau—even their chief was ruthless.

“I took a look around outside when I came in,” he heard Cui Buqu say.

If Huang Lüe and his allies intended to corrupt Rong Qing, there was no need to set anyone outside to eavesdrop on him. As long as he spent the night here, people would assume he was on Huang Lüe’s side.

Rong Qing pondered for a moment. “If I leave at dawn, won’t the person who sent the paintings think I’ve submitted to Huang Lüe? They might stop sending clues altogether. Shouldn’t I instead pretend to wake up in the middle of the night, make a scene, and leave?”

So he wasn’t completely hopeless after all. Cui Buqu’s mouth curled into a smirk. “Perhaps. But how much of a scene can you make on your own?”

Rong Qing shot him a quizzical look.

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Li Yan had also drunk immoderately at the banquet. By the end of the night, his servants had to help him stumble into the carriage. He slept soundly until the next morning, when a trusted aide came in with reports of a major incident at Magistrate Huang's residence the previous night.

Censor Rong had woken in the dead of night to discover a beautiful woman at his side. Enraged, he'd stormed into the next room and, finding his aide drunk as well, struck the man before grabbing a servant from the county office to help locate Huang Lüe. The censor had then yanked Huang Lüe from his bed and berated him for indulging in hedonistic pleasures with the disaster ongoing. The unfortunate County Magistrate Huang received a punch to the eye; he wouldn't be fit to appear in public for the next few days.

Li Yan burst into laughter. When he finally caught his breath, he asked, "Did Censor Rong really sleep with that woman?"

His aide winked. "I heard she woke with her clothes in disarray and bruises all over her body. She was crying and complaining about the pain. It seems Censor Rong hasn't had a proper meal in quite some time—he went a bit overboard!"

Li Yan laughed again. "Perhaps she lacks experience!"

"This Rong Qing may be reckless and rude, but he poses no real threat," his aide said, laughing with him. "Once the flood recedes, he'll have no choice but to depart empty-handed; then everything will return to normal. All will be well."

Li Yan shook his head. "That won't do. If nothing changes, how will I rise in the ranks and replace Huang Lüe? That bastard is so indecisive—it's clear he's wavering. There's a high chance he'll end up ruining things. Best for him and Rong Qing to battle it out—let them take care of each other. Go, fetch me a brush and some paper."

***

When Cui Buqu and Rong Qing returned to their lodgings at the relay station, they met Guan Shanhai on his way in.

Neither Guan Shanhai nor Qiao Xian had attended the previous night's banquet, for two reasons: First, bringing two expert martial artists as their guards would inevitably attract attention when they needed to keep a low profile. And second, if they were to be recognized, it would expose the involvement of the Zuoyue Bureau, which would hinder their investigation.

"What did you find?" Rong Qing couldn't resist asking Guan Shanhai.

Guan Shanhai glanced at Cui Buqu. On receiving a nod, he said, "The lord chief ordered me to investigate Yang Yun, the governor of Guangqian Commandery."

Rong Qing was taken aback. "Yang Yun? Shouldn't we be investigating Huang Lüe?"

"If Huang Lüe is corrupt, do you think Yang Yun is unaware? He's either feigning ignorance or an incompetent coward trapped under Huang Lüe's thumb. Or perhaps he's the real leader. Whichever it is, he cannot escape blame."

Rong Qing was stunned. He'd never considered the third possibility.

"Yang Yun's first wife died in childbirth over ten years ago," Guan Shanhai reported. "He married again, but his second wife bore him no children. She even urged him to take a concubine to ensure the continuation of the Yang family legacy, but Yang Yun insisted on remaining true to his second wife. To this day, he has no issue."

"He and his second wife must love each other dearly."

Guan Shanhai shook his head. "Over the past two days, I assumed a false identity, bribed the Yang family servants, and made up a few reasons to speak to them. Governor Yang spends most of his time in his study; he doesn't share a bedroom with his wife."

Rong Qing sensed some oddness in this, but couldn't put his finger on it.

Cui Buqu clarified things for him. "It's rare for a man, especially one of Yang Yun's age, to be uninterested in siring his own children. It'd be one

thing if he was devoted to his wife. But if he doesn't even share a bedroom with her, we can safely dismiss that possibility."

Rong Qing gasped in understanding. "There's something strange about this Yang Yun!"

Once the insight struck him, it unleashed a torrent of thoughts. "If Yang Yun is the culprit, Huang Lüe won't escape unscathed. Last night, I was watching everyone at the gathering closely. Most of the landlords seemed to dread my appearance, as if I was about to demand a pound of their flesh. But the Li and Ding families—the largest landlords in the county and those who instigated the dispute last night—looked unconcerned. Perhaps they're already colluding with Huang Lüe and embezzling the grain! There's also Wu Yi, the county lieutenant. He drank more than anyone else last night, yet what's he done for the relief efforts? He must be involved as well. Why, Deputy Magistrate Li Yan might be the only clean person in the entire county!"

Face pale with anger, Rong Qing continued, "Yang Yun didn't attend the banquet last night—I'd say it's because he has a guilty conscience!"

Midway through their conversation, Qiao Xian returned as well. She was carrying a large sack, her expression oddly conflicted. Her brows were tightly knit, and she glanced again and again at the sack. She seemed to yearn to toss it away, yet she clutched it as if afraid someone would take it from her. The stomach-turning stench of rot followed her through the door.

"Lord Chief, the results of the investigation you ordered." She placed the sack on the table and opened it carefully.

Rong Qing's eyes grew round, and his face drained of color.

Within the sack lay a jumble of rags and robes, their original color indiscernible. But this was not the source of the stench. The smell came from human remains, bloated and pale from immersion in the water, flesh still clinging to the bone beneath. Fingers, hands, hair, ribs. Patches of rotting flesh that'd slipped from the bone and limbs that appeared to have been gnawed on by wild beasts. Every single one bore visible slash wounds.

Rong Qing jerked his head away and rushed out of the room. A moment later, the sound of retching came from outside.

Cui Buqu remained composed. “Wrap them up. And have someone fetch a cup of water for Censor Rong.”

Rong Qing had drunk plenty the night before, but he hadn’t eaten much. After emptying the contents of his stomach until there was nothing but bile, he finally made his way back, one hand on the wall for support.

“Where did this come from?” he asked shakily.

“Outside the city. The spot where you nearly drowned,” said Qiao Xian.

Rong Qing was stunned. “You dug them up by that tree? So what the painting showed me was real!”

He took the water from Qiao Xian, but after a sip, a thought occurred to him. “Did you…did you wash your hands?”

Qiao Xian looked at him expressionlessly. “No.”

Rong Qing had already swallowed some water—he couldn’t even spit it out. His face instantly turned a vivid green.

Seeing him on the verge of rushing out to vomit again, Qiao Xian grabbed him and dragged him back, clicking her tongue. “You’re a man! Why are you being so fussy?”

Rong Qing longed to cry, but he had no tears. He turned his head away to avoid looking at the sack. “How many corpses did you find?”

“The flood receded slightly today. There was just barely enough room to stand by that tree. I uncovered these after just a little digging; there were more below them. If I kept digging…” Qiao Xian paused, then said sharply, “I feared I’d never reach the end.”

His lips quivered. Rong Qing didn’t know what to say.

At that moment, the station clerk arrived with a message—a child outside had asked the clerk to bring something in. The clerk produced a bamboo tube addressed to Rong Qing.

Rong Qing tossed aside all thoughts of his churning stomach and demanded, “Where is the child? Bring him here, quickly!”

The clerk ducked his head in apology. “He’s already run off; he only left this scroll. Take a look, my lordship?”

He hadn’t missed the odd stench in the room and had stayed on the threshold, refusing to enter. When Qiao Xian threw him a handful of copper coins, he set down the tube and happily excused himself.

Rong Qing unsealed the bamboo tube and pulled out a tightly rolled paper. Unfurling it revealed yet another painting.

The style was the same as the first two, but the brush strokes were much thicker this time. It looked to have been carelessly rolled up and stuffed into the bamboo tube directly upon completion.

At the foot of a mountain sat a villa surrounded by trees. No guards stood near the villa gates, but on the steps squatted a large rat—almost half a pillar in height. Its tail curled behind it on the ground as it stared at the gates, and it leaned greedily forward, as if poised to dash in at any moment.

“‘Big rat, big rat, no millet you shall eat. For three long years you’ve grown, no care for us you’ve shown. Big rat, big rat, no wheat you shall eat. For three long years you’ve grown, no kindness for us shown.’”[4] Rong Qing recited. “Is this another hint, telling us to visit this villa?”

“If the painting is accurate, the villa is surrounded by a dense forest,” Cui Buqu replied. “Assuming it’s in an area unaffected by the flood, it can only be to the north of the city.”

“Lord Chief,” Qiao Xian interjected. “If I may, our most urgent task should be to discover who’s been sending the paintings. They’ve sent three in a row to Censor Rong, hinting at wrongdoing, but refuse to reveal their identity. Why continue skulking about in the dark? Perhaps they mean us ill and wish to lead us astray.”

“But you also see now that all the hints were true,” Rong Qing countered. “How else could you have brought back that sack?!”

“A pile of corpses isn’t an explanation. If there’s really something suspicious happening at the villa in this painting, it must be heavily guarded. If you go rashly, you’ll alert the enemy. Find it if you have the ability, but don’t expect us to lead the charge. The lord chief didn’t come here to do your job for you!”

Stunned, Rong Qing flushed with shame.

“Enough,” Cui Buqu said. “Someone’s already found the location for us.”

He pulled a piece of paper from his sleeve, then unfolded it and placed it on the table.

Qixia Villa to the north of the city. The ninth night of the ninth month. Good for moon-watching. Removing clothes. Will await your arrival. Come alone. Let’s share warmth.

The writing was unruly, without any signature, and the message made no sense. It was almost laughable. Yet this was the paper Li Shisi had stuffed into Cui Buqu’s hand after teasing him the night before.

Chapter 136

CUI BUQU spoke slowly before everyone's dubious gazes. "Li Shisi handed me this note at the banquet last night. Whether he's trustworthy or not I can't say, but we can assume this is the villa in the painting. We won't have to look ourselves."

"You think Li Shisi created all three paintings?!" Rong Qing asked in shock.

Instead of answering, Cui Buqu explained what he'd gleaned from the first two paintings:

The first depicted a man in minister's robes, so the painter must be familiar with the ranks of government. The average farmer or townsperson wouldn't even know what color each rank wore, much less know enough to depict them with accuracy.

Qiao Xian had found corpses beneath the tree shown in the second painting, so its message had proven true. Those rag-covered bones were likely victims of the disaster—but why had they been killed? If they'd killed each other, there'd have been no one to bury them afterward; an unmarked mass grave of such size was also unlikely. There was only one explanation: Those people had been murdered, and the perpetrators didn't want them found. They'd buried the bodies, but the flood had eroded the soil, making it easy for Qiao Xian to unearth them.

Cui Buqu finished and looked around at everyone. As he'd anticipated, they wore looks of surprise.

Rong Qing's face remained pale. He swayed where he stood, looking even more shaken than before. "I know what happened… I know… Those victims must have tried to seek refuge in the city, but they were slaughtered on Huang Lüe's orders!"

An imperial envoy—Rong Qing himself—was about to arrive, yet there were starving refugees lingering outside the city. This was unacceptable. But the city granaries were depleted, and Huang Lüe and the prominent families didn't want to waste their own grain helping the victims.

So they simply massacred them. The victims, already weak with hunger, lacked the strength to resist.

If this theory held true, then the entire upper echelon of Guangqian County, from the county magistrate to the landlords, were either murderers or their accomplices.

“Huang Lüe deserves to die!” Rong Qing cursed fiercely, pounding his clenched fist on the table. He jerked his head up and looked at Cui Buqu. “I will write a memorial explaining the situation here and submit it to His Majesty today!”

“What if the victims simply died outside the city before entering, and Huang Lüe buried them to avoid the spread of disease? What would you say then?”

Rong Qing’s expression was fierce. “If that was so, how do you explain the cuts on their bodies?!”

Qiao Xian’s lip curled. “That’s easy enough to explain. They killed each other in desperation while fighting for food. The city was already starving, so Huang Lüe dared not let them inside. While he hesitated, they all perished. If you have no evidence, he’ll be accused of mismanagement at most. Keeping a city safe from a flood is a sizable accomplishment. The two will cancel each other out; nothing will change.”

Rong Qing felt as if a hand was squeezing his throat. Suddenly he couldn’t make a sound.

“Go investigate Li Shisi. See when he came to Guangqian County,” Cui Buqu told Qiao Xian. “And check whether there really is such a person in the Li family.”

Qiao Xian murmured her acknowledgment and left.

“What about the third picture?” Rong Qing couldn’t help asking.

“Qixia Villa,” said Cui Buqu. “Checking it would be helpful.”

Before Rong Qing could smile, Cui Buqu raised a finger. “But you’re not going. I am.”

Rong Qing froze, then blurted, “Chief Cui, how can you abandon me after all I’ve done for you?!”

Cui Buqu almost laughed at the absurdity of this statement. “If Qixia Villa really plays some part in this matter, it will be heavily guarded and fraught with danger. You want to go instead of me?”

The only two martial artists present, Guan Shanhai and Qiao Xian, were Cui Buqu’s subordinates. Rong Qing couldn’t order them around. The censor wilted. He felt he’d found many clues since his arrival, yet he’d failed to accomplish anything. There was obviously something very wrong in Guangqian County, yet he couldn’t unearth a single lead.

Rong Qing had been afire with ambition when he’d left the capital, but none of his hopes had withstood harsh reality.

A short while later, Qiao Xian returned.

Li Shisi was indeed a real person. Learning about him was easy: All one needed to do was to ask around at the Li family shops. Thanks to his inane behavior, no one would suspect the asker of anything other than curiosity.

“They say he’s a distant nephew of the Li family patriarch. He grew up wild in the countryside and is incredibly mischievous. He’s accomplished in neither scholarly pursuits nor martial arts; his greatest skill seems to be in speaking sweet words of flattery. At home, he spent his time in unbecoming places and drove his elders to distraction. They sent him here to Guangqian County and asked the Li family to arrange some tasks for him so he’d be discouraged from further mischief. But apparently, he’s only gotten worse. He’s rapidly endeared himself to all levels of the Li family with his silver tongue, and has had several romantic escapades—he even got involved with a married man. But he’s done well in his tasks, so the eldest son of the Li family likes him. When I asked around, I discovered he arrived in Guangqian County after the heavy rains began, around five or six days ago.”

“Ah,” said Rong Qing. “The rains started ten days ago, and the downpour quickly made the river overflow. The floods reached the city around four days later. In other words, Li Shisi couldn’t have witnessed the scene in the painting personally!”

Cui Buqu looked at Guan Shanhai. “What are your thoughts?”

He didn’t treat Guan Shanhai as a simple bodyguard but respected his opinion. Guan Shanhai had gradually softened toward the chief of the Zuoyue Bureau and was no longer as hostile as he’d been in the beginning. Guarding Cui Buqu was an unchangeable reality, and considering the importance Empress Dugu placed on the Zuoyue Bureau, he might be doing the job for a while. Better to make an earnest effort, he thought, instead of stewing in resentment.

He therefore gave a sincere answer. “It’s impossible for Li Shisi to have earned that much trust so soon after his arrival. If he didn’t witness the bodies being buried under the tree, then he must have heard about it somewhere. These corpses are a serious matter. Yet even we haven’t heard a whisper about it—how could he have learned of it after only a few days in the city? These three paintings are probably not from him. His choice of Qixia Villa as a meeting location is most likely a coincidence.”

Cui Buqu nodded. “But I still wish to go.”

Qiao Xian frowned. “Lord Chief!”

He raised a hand, and she instantly went quiet. “At the banquet last night, Li Shisi appeared out of nowhere. He rashly spoke when he shouldn’t have and drew everyone’s eye. But because of him, Huang Lüe and the Ding and Li families were unable to hold themselves back. They all made remarks that angered Censor Rong.”

Li Shisi might have looked like he was fooling around, but Cui Buqu felt his actions were in line with Feng Xiao’s usual style. His antics had lured out everyone’s true feelings.

“The commandery governor scorns you, Huang Lüe prefers to remain silent, and Deputy Magistrate Li Yan enjoys the limelight at the expense of his direct superior. Meanwhile, the Ding and Li families failed to take Censor Rong seriously from the start. But if Li Shisi hadn’t stood up and made an exhibition of himself, they might have continued talking and laughing, staging a scene of camaraderie for the feast.”

They’d have flattered Censor Rong until he lost sight of his original mission. He might really have sent a memorial to the court asking for more grain.

Rong Qing was furious. When he'd woken that morning, he'd realized he'd nearly fallen into a trap of Huang Lüe's making. To think he'd be tricked so thoroughly!

Guan Shanhai looked pensive, but Qiao Xian frowned. Cui Buqu seemed to be oddly trusting of this Li Shisi. Cui Buqu believed Li Shisi was Feng Xiao in disguise, so he'd aimed all his speculations in that direction. But what if his guess was wrong?

What if Li Shisi wasn't Feng Xiao? And even if he was, what if he'd come with evil intentions and wished to lure Cui Buqu into a trap?

"If Li Shisi didn't paint them, who did?" she asked.

Cui Buqu asked Rong Qing to take out the first two paintings. They placed the three works side by side, and the differences instantly became apparent. The brushwork on the third painting was much rougher and more careless than the first two: The painter had conveyed the rat and villa in just a few strokes. They'd likely been in a hurry while painting—they hadn't even waited for the ink to dry before stuffing it into the tube and rushing it out the door.

Rong Qing hadn't previously noticed these details. As he took a closer look, he observed, "The creator is an excellent painter; he can't be just anyone. And if he knows these things, he must be of a certain status within the county, privy to key secrets. He may be a member of either the Li or Ding family."

Despite being impulsive and immature, now that he'd calmed down, Rong Qing was proving himself to be slightly less useless. "The third painting was delivered this morning just after we arrived. They must be watching our every move. If I'd thrown in with Huang Lüe last night, they probably wouldn't have sent the painting. Cui-xiansheng, in your opinion, did this mystery person attend the banquet?"

Cui Buqu nodded. "Not only is this person not an average citizen, he's probably received considerable accolades in calligraphy and painting. He did his best to conceal identifying traces, but it's still clear he's a painter of remarkable skill. Lao-Guan, go find out if anyone among the banquet attendees has some small renown as a painter or calligrapher."

Guan Shanhai left without a word, making no objection to the familiar address. Perhaps he'd realized how messy the situation in Guangqian County was. Martial arts wouldn't help him here. In contrast, Cui Buqu was a pillar of support. Even Rong Qing, who disliked the Zuoyue Bureau, had unconsciously come to lean on Cui Buqu and follow his lead.

Cui-xiansheng was riddled with illness, and most of the time was lethargic and weak. But in his presence, all uncertainties seemed to fall away, and thorny problems were easily overcome.

Breakfast was delivered promptly, but no one had much of an appetite. After a few bites, Rong Qing got up and went for a walk, saying he'd try and think if there were any more clues. Perhaps he sensed Qiao Xian had something to say and found a reason to excuse himself, but in any case, Cui Buqu didn't stop him.

The instant Rong Qing left, Qiao Xian blurted, "Lord Chief, please let me go instead!"

"Guan Shanhai will be there; you don't need to worry. Feng Xiao will have his reasons for leaving a clue like this."

He was completely convinced Li Shisi was Feng Xiao.

Qiao Xian compressed her lips. Cui Buqu had interacted with Feng Xiao much more than she had. Someone as perceptive as him must be able to recognize Feng Xiao via all the scattered and minute clues. Yet even so—

"Lord Chief, Feng Xiao is a member of the Jiejian Bureau. His every move is made to benefit his own organization. Look at what happened at Mount Tiannan, when he feigned surrender and eradicated the Thirteen Floors' base. Your lordship was seriously injured, yet he obtained the sarira that took his martial arts to the next level. We even had to share the credit. Do you really think he came here just to send you clues, with no ulterior motive?"

Cui Buqu glanced up at her. "What are you trying to say?"

Qiao Xian seemed to struggle for a moment. Then she fell resolutely to her knees, looking up at him. "This subordinate believes your lordship's regard for Feng Xiao has already crossed a line."

Cui Buqu smiled. “Oh? What line is this? Who decides it—you?”

He was angry. Qiao Xian could hear it, but she pressed on. “Lord Chief. Feng Xiao isn’t one of us. He pretends to be careless and wild, but he’s shrewd and calculating. From Liugong City up till now, he’s never suffered a single loss from our collaborations. He must be in Guangqian County for reasons of his own. Maybe he wants your lordship to do the investigating for him, so he can take advantage of your efforts and steal the credit again!”

He nodded. “I know. Everything you said is consistent with his personality.”

“Then why does your lordship still trust him?!” Qiao Xian cried.

Why?

Cui Buqu considered it carefully. He remembered Feng Xiao slipping the knife between his ribs in that cave. At the time, he’d been neither angry nor surprised—he’d already calculated every factor and understood Feng Xiao’s reasoning. If Feng Xiao hadn’t stabbed him then, it would have only made him a fool.

Softness didn’t suit them.

But he hadn’t anticipated that Feng Xiao, having escaped, would return to look for him as Fan Yun said, leaving him vulnerable to Yuxiu’s attack. If Feng Xiao had left earlier using the method Cui Buqu taught him to traverse the array, he would never have become trapped inside.

And because Feng Xiao had come back to look for him, he too had gone to find Feng Xiao. Perhaps this was the moment they’d become inseparably entangled, the line between favors and grudges permanently blurred.

“Lord Chief, the Jiejian Bureau is coexisting peacefully with us at the moment thanks to Feng Xiao, but His Majesty won’t be happy to see our bureaus grow so close. Feng Xiao wouldn’t cozy up to you without some other goal in mind!”

Qiao Xian had never interfered with Cui Buqu’s personal matters. She followed him and obeyed his orders. No matter how dangerous things became, she pressed forward without hesitation. But she’d never liked Feng

Xiao, and now, she could no longer be silent. Even if it meant angering Cui Buqu, she had to make this protest.

Cui Buqu blinked. “Anything he could get from me, he could get from His Majesty just as easily. Why bother?”

Gritting her teeth, Qiao Xian said, “Because he lusts after you!”

For a moment Cui Buqu sat stunned; he’d never expected Qiao Xian to say such a thing. Then he burst out laughing. He laughed and laughed, unable to stop, until he was doubled over, still laughing uncontrollably.

Qiao Xian flushed crimson.

Cui Buqu laughed for a long time before straightening up and shaking his head. “Impossible.”

He, Cui Buqu, was wracked with illness, a withering tree. Perhaps he’d live to see next spring, but there was no guarantee he’d see the one after. And Feng Xiao, with his martial arts and his beauty, considered himself a peerless existence. Even the legendary beauty Feng Xiaolian hadn’t impressed him—he’d rather marry his own portrait. Why would such a person fall in love with Cui Buqu, who was vicious, caustic, and callous in his methods?

“You’ve got it wrong, Qiao Xian. It’s true we’re neither enemies nor friends, but I know him. I believe he won’t turn on us on a whim.”

“But what if he doesn’t show up at the meeting tomorrow night?” Qiao Xian asked.

Cui Buqu paused. “He will.”

Such a definite answer.

Qiao Xian suddenly had a theory—one she dared not think too much about. To trust someone meant you cared for them. Had Feng Xiao become someone Cui Buqu cared for? Perhaps he hadn’t noticed it himself. Or maybe he had, but didn’t want to acknowledge it.

From Liugong City to Guangqian County, traces dense and fine as spider’s silk had stretched over half the Northern dynasty, weaving the two men together. Had this become enough to soften Cui Buqu’s cold and steely heart?

And if so, did Feng Xiao deserve it?

At three-quarters of an hour past noon, Guan Shanhai returned. Rong Qing rushed inside to hear what he'd found. Neither of them knew what had transpired during the conversation between Cui Buqu and Qiao Xian. If they noticed the atmosphere was a little awkward, neither of them was foolish enough to point it out.

Guan Shanhai had returned with a crucial message. "Lord Chief, Censor Rong. There wasn't much time, so I could only briefly check on Commandery Governor Yang Yun, County Magistrate Huang Lüe, Deputy Magistrate Li Yan, and County Lieutenant Wu Yi, along with several prominent households within the city: Li, Ding, Zhao, and Zhong. I found that Huang Lüe is an accomplished calligrapher and painter. He studied under Dong Boren, and his style resembles that master's. When he first arrived in Guangqian County and assumed his post, the Ding and Li families asked to be painted in an attempt to curry favor. This subordinate couldn't find any examples of Huang Lüe's paintings in such a short amount of time, so I went to the nearest antique shop and asked for a copy of Dong Boren's work."

He unrolled the paintings he'd brought back and slowly laid them out before the group.

Rong Qing gasped and brought the second and third paintings over to compare. "The way the leaves are drawn…they're almost identical!"

But this only sparked more questions. Why had Huang Lüe sent Rong Qing the paintings, providing him with the clues he needed to investigate the misappropriation of the grain? Surely he knew that if this matter came to light, he himself would be implicated?

The discovery was as if a giant stone had dropped from the sky, slamming into them and leaving their heads ringing. Rong Qing was especially baffled. Afraid he was seeing things, he compared the paintings again and again.

"There are two possibilities," said Cui Buqu. "First, he exposed his crimes on purpose. By acting against his own interests, he hopes to mislead us, then annihilate us in one strike when the time is right. But there's a second possibility. He might be working with the enemy against his will. His loyalties lie elsewhere, but he doesn't dare defy his co-conspirators

openly. This is the only method he can use to send you clues. If you fail, he's safe. But if the court investigates, he can cite his contributions to lighten his sentence."

Rong Qing, still comparing the paintings, inhaled sharply.

He too had endured a life of strenuous studies as a scholar, and had dabbled in the four arts: music, weiqi, calligraphy, and painting. He could tell these three paintings had been painted in the same style as the samples Guan Shanhai had retrieved. They were most certainly painted by Huang Lüe.

"Cui-xiansheng. Let me come with you tonight!" Rong Qing requested again.

"No, you stay here," Cui Buqu said. "Huang Lüe has sent you three paintings; who knows, maybe he'll send you a fourth. We may obtain more clues if you're here."

Rong Qing wanted to protest, but he swallowed the words and simply nodded his assent. With Qiao Xian and Guan Shanhai by his side, Cui Buqu would be safe. And with Cui Buqu there, they might discover more inside Qixia Villa—maybe even the key that would crack the case.

He smelled a hint of danger: the scent of an approaching storm.

But even then, he didn't anticipate the peril Cui Buqu and the others would encounter on their trip. As far as Rong Qing was concerned, Guan Shanhai and Qiao Xian were more than enough to protect Cui Buqu if they needed to escape.

Cui Buqu and the other two thought much the same.

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Night fell. It was almost the appointed time.

The heavy rain had stopped that afternoon, and the floods had receded slightly. The people saw the first light of clear skies after the rain, and the worries and fears that had weighed on them in recent days lifted. Tonight, Guangqian County slept soundly.

But above them dark clouds quietly gathered once more, blotting out the stars and moon. If no wind came to blow them away, another downpour would soon arrive to worsen Guangqian County’s situation.

Outside Qixia Villa, there was silence. Even the mountain birds had tucked their heads under their wings. The villa gates were latched tightly, but black shadows shuffled inside, indicating that while security on the outside might be lax, the inside wasn’t the same.

The leaves rustled, and the wind began to blow. Three shadows landed lightly on the roof and slipped down into the backyard. No one noticed their arrival.

Chapter 137

QIXIA WAS A COMMON name with a pleasant meaning—*dwelling in the clouds.* When the powerful and affluent wished to name their villas something that sounded somewhat sophisticated, it was among the most frequent picks.

This wasn't to say that the owner of this villa was unrefined, merely that it was an exceedingly ordinary villa. When spring turned to summer, the villa's owner would often leave the city with his family and come to this retreat, which lay in the higher terrain to the city's north. The villa sat halfway up the slopes of a mountain, the perfect spot for avoiding the summer heat.

Nevertheless, there was something strange about the place.

Its gates were locked, and a layer of dust coated the scattered footprints on the steps. It looked like no one had visited for a long time. Yet in contrast, the eaves were clean and showed no traces of cobwebs. The plaque inscribed with the words *Qixia Villa* was also in perfect condition, a deterrent to potential thieves. Outside or in, no lamps were lit.

The wind whistled past the leaves and slipped through the cracks in the windows, its sound transforming into something eerie, like a vengeful ghost howling into the wilderness. The backyard was empty. A latent danger seemed to lurk in the shadows, as if a ferocious beast might bound out at any time and pounce, its bloody maw open wide.

As the three of them were uninvited guests, however, they were unbothered by the atmosphere. Holding Cui Buqu's arm, Guan Shanhai landed gently on the ground. Cui Buqu pointed, and Qiao Xian took the lead, heading toward the woodshed and kitchen to explore.

As for what lay in Qixia Villa, and why Huang Lüe and Feng Xiao had both sent them here at the same time—tonight, they were bound to find answers.

Qiao Xian strode up to the door and was about to push it open when Guan Shanhai snatched her wrist. He jerked a finger upward, motioning for

her to enter through the roof. Qiao Xian ground her teeth. Ever since Guan Shanhai had come, another position seemed to have opened at Cui Buqu's side, one that quietly ate away at her importance.

But Cui Buqu was still waiting nearby. She couldn't afford to be willful. Qiao Xian leapt up to the roof, then stooped, lifting a few tiles and placing them to the side. She jumped in through the resulting hole, night pearl in hand to light the way.

It was one of the night pearls Cui Buqu had plucked from the cave in Mount Tiannan. He'd taken the dagger Fan Yun had left at his bedside and used the chance to pry a few night pearls from the stone walls along the way. Xiao Lü was rich enough; he wouldn't miss them. If Cui Buqu'd had room in his pockets, he'd have taken one for every member of the Zuoyue Bureau.

In the night pearl's dim glow, Qiao Xian gradually made out the contents of the woodshed. The windows were locked from the inside, impossible to open. When her gaze fell on the door, she couldn't hold back a soft gasp.

A trap was set up behind the door. The moment someone pushed it open, it would trigger crossbows that would kill them instantly. Had she ignored Guan Shanhai's advice, even if she'd managed to evade the crossbow bolts, she would have alerted the guards in the villa.

This villa wasn't as ordinary as it looked. After all, what wealthy family would place traps in their own holiday home?

Outside, Guan Shanhai had found the same trap in the kitchen. After searching the rest of the room and finding nothing unusual, he returned the way he came, planning to check out other buildings in the backyard. Considering the traps behind the doors of the kitchen and woodshed, they were already certain something strange was going on here. If not, the owners wouldn't have taken security so seriously.

Guan Shanhai saw Cui Buqu crouching next to a flower bed, head bent as if examining something.

"Lord Chief," Guan Shanhai said quietly.

Cui Buqu didn't look at him. He picked up a green brick next to the flower bed. There was no soil underneath, but an empty hole.

Realizing something was amiss, Guan Shanhai didn’t wait for orders; he reached into the hole, where he found a smaller piece of brick. This one was loose, as if it could be pushed down. He looked to Cui Buqu for his approval, and Cui Buqu patted his shoulder twice in agreement. No sound passed between them in the dark.

Though Guan Shanhai had only recently joined the Zuoyue Bureau, his previous career had been in the army. He was highly disciplined, capable of enduring far more than even the trained Zuoyue guards. Cui Buqu had brought him on this trip partially out of respect for the empress, but also as a test of his abilities. So far he had performed excellently, picking up Cui Buqu’s tacit cues even more quickly than Qiao Xian, who’d been with him for years. It was no surprise Qiao Xian was unhappy.

At Cui Buqu’s signal, Guan Shanhai pressed down on the brick.

There came a low roaring sound as something underground began to shift.

All three of them stood stunned. The ground in the backyard split down the middle, then slowly pulled apart to reveal a pitch-black chasm with no bottom they could see.

Guan Shanhai reacted swiftly. He directed the night pearl’s light downward and illuminated a cellar full of sacks. When he extended his arm and poked a hole in one of them, a stream of something that looked like pale sand spilled out to bounce from his palm and onto the floor: Rice—plump, white fresh rice.

Thanks to the disaster this year in Guangqian County, most of their farmland had been swept away before the rice could be harvested. This couldn’t be rice from their local fields, and it certainly wasn’t old rice either. It was this season’s fresh rice, transported directly from the imperial warehouses.

A noise came from the front yard, followed by the patter of approaching footsteps. Lamplight cast swaying shadows around the yard, followed by panicked voices.

Should they stay or go? Guan Shanhai couldn’t decide.

They’d alerted the enemy. If they left now, their adversary would move the rice the next day, and no evidence would remain. But if they

stayed, he and Qiao Xian would have to repel the guards, then call for Rong Qing to summon the nearby Zuoyue guards to seize the people and goods here. If they were captured in the process, forget any chance of investigating—they'd be lucky if anyone found their corpses.

Guan Shanhai had never had to make such decisions in the Right Guard. He understood now why Cui Buqu had to come himself. Neither he nor Qiao Xian could bear the responsibility of this choice.

"Go!" Cui Buqu's succinct order cut through Guan Shanhai's spiraling thoughts.

He breathed a secret sigh of relief. At that moment, his confidence in Cui Buqu grew a hundredfold. He'd been reluctant to leave the capital just a few days ago, yet at this critical juncture, he didn't think twice about the order he was executing. Even Guan Shanhai couldn't have said when his feelings had changed. The ailing Zuoyue Bureau chief had a strange power to ground others.

The instant Cui Buqu's order left his mouth, Guan Shanhai grabbed him and leapt out of the villa with Qiao Xian close on their heels. As soon as they landed, several black shadows flew out of the forest and lunged toward them.

Blades clanged as bloodlust boiled in the air.

It was a trap! thought Guan Shanhai. Their opponents had been waiting for them to arrive so they could capture them in one fell swoop. No wonder their incursion had gone so smoothly.

"Take him away! I'll hold them here!" cried Qiao Xian. She leapt at the enemies without looking back. So ferocious was her sword that not even the wind could slip between her swings. She wove a dense sword screen, warding off seven or eight attackers and leaving them unable to advance an inch.

Guan Shanhai didn't hesitate. He snatched Cui Buqu up and ran.

While Qiao Xian held the others off, Guan Shanhai pulled Cui Buqu along, sprinting without pause for several miles. They were almost at the foot of the mountain, but Guan Shanhai dared not let down his guard. The forest here was dense with trees swaying in the howling wind. Their

branches cast shadows over sky and earth, as if ready to ambush them from all sides.

Bloodlust!

Bloodlust was there, yet not. Front, back, left, right; the air shifted, and Guan Shanhai jerked his head around. Black clouds curled and whipped the branches and leaves, dragging long shadows across the ground.

But without light, how could there be shadow?

An alarm sounded in Guan Shanhai's heart. In the next breath, a long sword cut soundlessly toward him. But he wasn't the target—it was Cui Buqu.

Shocked, Guan Shanhai flung himself backward faster than he ever had in his life, unsheathing his saber and hurling it at the newcomer. Even then, he was too slow. The sword flew like an arrow, impossible to evade. Cui Buqu scrambled back, but a few steps from a layman were nothing in the face of sword qi. The blade tore through his clothes and pierced his chest.

Agony lanced through Cui Buqu's heart. The new injury aggravated the old one, and pain rolled over him like the tide. He groaned and stumbled. Yet after drawing blood, the sword went no further—Guan Shanhai's saber stopped it before it could run him through.

Guan Shanhai leapt forward and engaged the enemy. Their blades flashed and wove, so fast it was impossible to look away.

Cui Buqu pressed a hand to his wound and staggered back another few steps. After his initial muffled groan, he made no sound. He remained quiet as a corpse, allowing Guan Shanhai to concentrate on fighting the enemy.

The villa's lanterns, now lit, glimmered in the distance, but their dim light merely revealed that the newcomer's face was masked. Only his angular figure hinted that he was a man. Still, unless someone was a prodigious talent who had studied all forms throughout the land, it was nigh impossible to conceal the origins of one's martial arts—especially not from someone as knowledgeable as Cui Buqu.

So it's him.

In an instant, many points connected. Cui Buqu understood—but that didn't help the situation at hand. If they couldn't escape tonight, they would be cold corpses by morning. It wouldn't matter what they'd discovered.

The masked man was a formidable fighter, at least on par with Guan Shanhai. Guan Shanhai's martial arts were suited for the battlefield, but the masked man's moves were a classic example of jianghu assassination techniques. Guan Shanhai's bold and vigorous style couldn't be used to its full effect against him.

He felt his strikes blocked from all directions, while he himself took blow after blow. But Guan Shanhai was adaptable. He switched from offense to defense and bided his time. His saber guarded the small area before him, as well as Cui Buqu at his back, while he waited for a chance to counterattack.

Within the villa, Qiao Xian remained trapped; her companions couldn't know whether she was dead or alive. She was skilled enough to escape unscathed as long as her opponents didn't overpower her too greatly, yet she was terrified that if she didn't pin her adversaries down here, they'd catch up to Cui Buqu. She stubbornly, painfully held on.

The villa's lanterns shone brightly, no longer hidden.

Had this ambush been prepared for them? Had their opponents known of their coming and quietly awaited their arrival before springing the trap? Or had they been alerted to their party's intrusion when they'd opened the underground cellar?

Cui Buqu watched the man fighting Guan Shanhai. In his heart, he already knew the answer.

But no matter how much danger they were in now, one fact remained: Despite passing him the note, Feng Xiao—or rather, Li Shisi—hadn't shown up.

Li Shisi *was* Feng Xiao. Where had the star of tonight's show gone?

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Rong Qing looked at the letter in front of him, his heart in turmoil.

The message was only one line, a request to meet Rong Qing in the study in the county office's backyard tonight. In place of a signature, there was a small illustration of leafy branches and distant mountains, rendered in the same style as the three paintings.

Rong Qing couldn't be certain the handwriting belonged to Huang Lüe, and indeed, Huang Lüe seemed to have predicted his hesitation. He'd therefore included these sketches, allowing Rong Qing to carefully compare them with the others to earn his trust.

Should he go or not? Rong Qing was paralyzed with indecision.

He and Cui Buqu had analyzed the situation earlier that day. Huang Lüe had painted picture after picture, hinting at some larger conspiracy lurking beneath the relief efforts. Cui Buqu had set off for Qixia Villa to investigate with Guan Shanhai and Qiao Xian, while Rong Qing remained in the relay station, waiting for Huang Lüe's fourth painting.

But this letter had arrived instead.

Perhaps Huang Lüe was trying to free himself from his predicament. His only way out was to support the imperial censor's attempts to bring the malfeasance to light, thereby atoning for his crimes through meritorious deeds. Yet he must also fear that Rong Qing wouldn't succeed.

Now Rong Qing understood why the empress had sent Cui Buqu. The intrigue here was too deep, and might even involve relatives of the royal family. Without Cui Buqu here, Rong Qing wouldn't have gotten anywhere.

But fortunately, Cui Buqu *was* here.

At this thought, he felt a bit calmer. But he soon grew conflicted again. Before Cui Buqu left, he'd warned Rong Qing not to leave the relay station under any circumstances. They hadn't expected Huang Lüe would personally pen a letter to him. Maybe someone had discovered Huang Lüe's duplicity, so he'd seized his chance, no longer concerned about being exposed. He might have evidence that Guangqian County had misappropriated the grain. Rong Qing had a hunch that if he missed this chance, there would not be another.

Finally, he made up his mind. He stuffed the note into his lapels before heading out.

It was late, and the dew was heavy on the leaves and grasses. Rong Qing hurried along the back roads, unseen, until he arrived at the small door behind the county office where groceries were usually delivered. Just as he was wondering whether to knock, the door opened.

A servant in dark blue bowed and beckoned him in.

Rong Qing took a few steps inside as the servant said, “The magistrate ordered me to bring you to the study. Don’t make any noise—Commandery Governor Yang’s eyes are everywhere in this manor.”

So the letter really was from Huang Lüe.

Reassured, Rong Qing nodded. He was crackling with nerves. The servant had implied that Commandery Governor Yang Yun was involved too. Perhaps he would be the prize catch.

Rong Qing followed the servant through the winding corridor and came to the door of the study. In the glow of dim candlelight through the window, he saw the silhouette of a man sitting at a table—Huang Lüe.

No one was guarding the door. Huang Lüe must have sent them away in preparation. The servant in blue whispered, “Please step inside, sir. I’ll keep watch out here.”

Rong Qing strode through the door, and the servant shut it behind him, as if afraid of being discovered. Rong Qing paid him no heed and stepped up to the desk in the center of the room. Behind the rolled-up curtain, Huang Lüe had his back to him. He sat with his elbows on his desk, hunched over as if writing furiously.

“Huang Lüe, I’m here. What did you want to tell me?”

The magistrate didn’t turn—his shoulders didn’t even twitch. He obviously hadn’t heard him. But wasn’t he the one who’d invited Rong Qing over?

Something was wrong.

“Huang Lüe?” Rong Qing slowly stepped forward, reaching out to shake him gently.

Huang Lüe slumped limply to the side, and Rong Qing reeled back in horror. A dagger protruded from Huang Lüe’s neck—it’d pierced his throat cleanly, a single, fatal strike.

What was this?! Rong Qing's head was spinning. Before he'd fully registered what he'd seen, he turned and was rushing toward the door.

Locked!

He flew to the window and found it, too, was blocked from the outside; it couldn't be opened. Rong Qing was no martial artist; it was impossible for him to leap up to the rafters and break through the roof tiles to escape. He was trapped.

Suddenly it grew bright outside. Lamps flamed to life one after another, accompanied by shouts. "Help! Murder! Censor Rong has killed the magistrate! Guards!"

Rong Qing was sure now that he'd fallen—completely and utterly—into a trap.

But a key question sprang to his mind: How did the other party know there was no one with him—that he'd had to come to the meeting alone? Could Cui Buqu be in danger at the villa? Rong Qing's heart plummeted. He stood beside Huang Lüe's slumped body, listening as the clamor rose outside. He didn't know who'd been called over.

A group of people rushed to the door and kicked it open. Commandery Governor Yang Yun was in the lead, ready to arrest the culprit. Behind him were Li Yan, Wu Yi, and more.

"What nerve you have, Rong Qing!" barked the governor. "Did you think being a censor gave you leave to do whatever you want? To kill an official of the court?!"

"So it was you—it was you!" Rong Qing burst into wild laughter.

Yang Yun looked at Rong Qing as if he'd gone mad. He waved his hand. "Guards! Seize him!"

"Don't touch me!" Rong Qing jabbed a finger at Yang Yun. "You killed Huang Lüe and called me here so you could frame me. *You're* the real murderer!"

Yang Yun sighed. "Why did the court send a madman as censor?" He turned to the others. "It's not my place to involve myself in the affairs of your county, but I fear this is a serious crime; I must arrest him and report it to the court. Have you any objections?"

Yang Yun was the commandery governor; Li Yan and Wu Yi both ranked below him. They quickly said, “We’ll follow the governor’s lead!”

“I am an imperial envoy! Who dares arrest me?!” roared Rong Qing. “Huang Lüe sent me three paintings that hinted at embezzlement of relief grain in Guangqian County. I came here at his invitation to inquire about the case, only to find he’d already been silenced. I’m going to submit a memorial! Yang Yun, by arresting me today, you’ve merely proven your own guilt. You killed him!”

Yang Yun laughed in anger. “Very well! It appears Censor Rong won’t relent until his back is to the Yellow River. You claim Huang Lüe sent you three paintings. Where are they?”

Rong Qing raised his chin. “My room at the relay station!”

“Then I shall go there with you personally,” Yang Yun said, clipped. “If you can’t produce them, don’t blame me for taking drastic measures.”

At the sight of Yang Yun’s brazen confidence, Rong Qing’s heart sank. Still, he had no choice but to lead them to the relay station while secretly praying Cui Buqu and the others would return as quickly as possible. He’d completely forgotten that, just a few days ago, he hadn’t been able to stand Cui Buqu. Right now, the man was his last lifeline—Rong Qing could only pray that Cui Buqu showed up in time.

The group made their way to the relay station. Rong Qing sprinted into his room ahead of everyone and threw himself onto the bed to grope beneath the blankets. His face turned ashen.

He yanked the blankets away. Where there should have been three paintings, now, there was nothing but empty sheets.

Chapter 138

RONG QING STOPPED his frantic search and whipped his head around to meet Yang Yun's gaze. Yang Yun's eyes were serene, as if he'd anticipated this result—or as if the paintings and message had all been Rong Qing's hallucination in the first place.

In an instant, Rong Qing understood everything.

Huang Lüe had indeed been the creator of the three paintings. He had likely provided them clues in hopes of saving his own skin. But the enemy had discovered him. They'd thus lured Cui Buqu and his guards away and set a trap for Rong Qing. Yang Yun sent Rong Qing a letter pretending to be Huang Lüe, knowing he was sure to come. After all, Huang Lüe was the pivot on which this whole case turned. Rong Qing couldn't ignore the temptation of such an important potential lead.

The moment Rong Qing arrived, the trap had snapped shut. Huang Lüe had been silenced, and Rong Qing was caught red-handed in his study in the middle of the night.

Distantly, Rong Qing heard Yang Yun questioning the servant in blue. "Did you let the censor in?"

The servant lowered his head, his face concealed in shadow. "Yes. Censor Rong said he had something important to discuss with the magistrate. After asking the magistrate for his instructions, this humble servant invited Censor Rong inside."

"What did they talk about?" asked Yang Yun.

"I don't know," said the servant. "I was ordered to keep watch outside the door—but I heard the two of them argue, and the yelling grew louder and louder. The magistrate shouted, 'I'm an official of the imperial court; it's my duty to uphold the imperial court's laws! I won't let you do as you please!' I heard the inkstone being knocked over and the tables and chairs being overturned. When I saw things were getting out of hand, I called for help. I got the door open as quickly as I could, only to find…"

His voice trembled, as if he'd really heard everything he described. Rong Qing laughed bitterly, not bothering to refute him. No matter what he said, Huang Lüe's death was firmly pinned on him. This was a script, written and finalized long before tonight. It didn't matter whether Rong Qing was there or not; the play would go on regardless.

Yang Yun acted like he hadn't heard Rong Qing's laugh, and the other officials did the same. "What did you find?"

Rong Qing glanced at Li Yan, who hadn't once lifted his head to look at him. Why had he thought the deputy magistrate an honest man? This entire time, the only one he could have won over was Huang Lüe. Now Huang Lüe was dead, and he had taken his secrets with him.

"This humble servant found County Magistrate Huang on the ground; Censor Rong was standing over him with a dagger in his hand. When he saw I'd opened the door, he lunged toward me. I was terrified—I fled as fast as my feet would carry me, then locked the windows and doors before calling for help. Afterward, your lordships received the news…"

The servant in blue was clear and methodical as he recited his tale. One day he'd make a shrewd and capable subordinate. Had Rong Qing not been the target of his accusations, he would have hired the man himself.

At this point, Rong Qing felt that producing his last piece of evidence —the secret letter—would be a useless exercise. Even so, he clung to his last glimmer of hope as he drew the letter from his lapels and placed it on the table. "This is a letter from Huang Lüe. He sent me three paintings, warning me that the imperial grain in Guangqian County had been embezzled by the local officials. Not a mouthful of this grain made it to the refugees. The conspirators not only misappropriated the resources of the court, they let the people starve. To quell potential unrest and stop the court from investigating, they resolved to finish what they started—they massacred a large group of refugees outside the city. I've uncovered several corpses beneath the tree in the city's outskirts. Yang Yun, how do you explain this?"

Yang Yun opened the letter and examined it with a critical eye. "Censor Rong, I do want to believe you. However, I must say that I've seen County Magistrate Huang's handwriting before. This letter wasn't penned by him."

Rong Qing wasn't at all surprised to hear this. If Yang Yun had known Huang Lüe sent the three paintings and deliberately sent a fake letter to lure his prey to the county office, everything made sense.

As for the illustration at the end of the letter—the trees and mountains in Huang Lüe's style—the murderer had likely forced Huang Lüe to paint it before killing him in order put Rong Qing's doubts to rest.

Rong Qing was forced to admit that, up against the sly old fox Yang Yun and the iron fortress that was Guangqian County, he had fallen face-first into the mud and bloodied his nose. "Are you satisfied, Yang Yun? When I first arrived, you were like an old and experienced hunter. You waited silently for your prey to leap into the trap of its own accord."

"Censor Rong, do you hear yourself? I can't understand a word you're saying." Yang Yun sighed, and a faint look of pity crept over his face. "Corpses? Li Yan, Wu Yi, do you have any idea what he's talking about?"

At this, Li Yan finally took a step forward and cupped his hands politely. "The corpses he refers to must be from the refugees who died of disease. To stop the spread of infection, the magistrate ordered that they all be buried together. The flood was at its worst then, and the matter was urgent; I fear the job was done hastily."

"I see." Yang Yun nodded and looked at Rong Qing. "But Censor Rong, why on earth would you kill County Magistrate Huang?"

Rong Qing roared with laughter. "You tell me! Why did I kill Huang Lüe?"

Yang Yun watched him impassively. "Huang Lüe is dead, and only you know why. You may be an imperial envoy, but even you must be held accountable for the unlawful killing of an official. If you cannot provide a valid reason for your actions, I will be forced to detain you until the imperial edict arrives, at which point the appropriate punishment will be meted out."

"Indeed, it seems one can be condemned on any pretext at all!" Rong Qing pointed at Yang Yun and said harshly, "Do you dare return to the capital with me, where we can have this debate in front of the emperor?!"

Yang Yun shook his head. “You are an imperial censor, yet you knowingly broke the law and killed the county magistrate. Still you refuse to repent. Seize him!”

He raised his hand, and constables swarmed forward, flanking Rong Qing and restraining him.

“Let me go! I’m an imperial censor! You dare defy your superior?!”

Rong Qing couldn’t go down without a fight. If they captured him, it was only a matter of time before he passed away in custody under dubious circumstances. The emperor might even find a report on his desk, detailing his crimes and stamped with his own seal. Perhaps other censors would come later to exonerate him—but Rong Qing was human, and had only this one life. By then, it would be too late.

He struggled desperately, yelling and cursing, hoping to sway the constables. But he was quickly disappointed. They obeyed Yang Yun without question and remained utterly unmoved by anything Rong Qing said.

Li Yan, Wu Yi, and the others also turned a deaf ear to his protests, acting as if he wasn’t there at all.

“Let me go! Let me go!” No matter how hard Rong Qing dug his heels into the ground, he was slowly dragged toward the door. Was he really going to fail here and die without achieving anything? Facing his own sorry end, Rong Qing’s disappointment turned into despair. Anger and grief howled within him.

At that moment, a voice both familiar and strange rang out from beyond the door: “Who dares lay their hands on an imperial censor?”

It was as if the voice of heaven itself had boomed down from the clouds. Rong Qing whipped his head around with such force he feared he’d broken his own neck. But he barely noticed the pain as he stared out of the room.

The others had also turned toward the sound, their faces blank with surprise. Who would dare vouch for the murderer, Censor Rong?

A figure appeared in the doorway. He strode toward the crowd with a cold solemnity, his cloak fluttering in his wake. He appeared sickly and

alone, yet it was as though he commanded an army at his back. The petty officials were visibly intimidated and instinctively shrank back to clear a path for him.

“Cui-xiansheng!” Overcome, Rong Qing almost burst into tears on the spot. He’d never felt more grateful, more reverent, toward Cui Buqu than he did at this moment. In Rong Qing’s eyes, Cui Buqu’s figure had become a towering colossus.

Looking up at his virtue like a mountain, we walk the bright road in admiration.

Unfortunately, the others didn’t share the sentiment. County Lieutenant Wu Yi had been frantically looking for a chance to show off before the commandery governor. Seeing Cui Buqu, he stepped up to the threshold to bar his way. “Where did you come from, you rebel? Get—”

“I am Cui Buqu.” Cui Buqu spoke over him before he could finish. He pulled out a wooden token and tossed it at Yang Yun.

Yang Yun dodged, and the token hit Li Yan on the calf. Li Yan grimaced in pain. He lifted a foot to step on that accursed token, but Cui Buqu’s next words stopped him in his tracks.

“The chief of the Zuoyue Bureau has authority equal to the Six Ministers and the prerogative to act first and report later.” Cui Buqu looked around, the picture of arrogant impatience. “In short, I outrank Yang Yun. Understand?”

Li Yan and Wu Yi looked at each other. The lieutenant was first to speak. “I know of the imperial court’s Three Departments and Six Ministries. But I’ve never heard of any Zuoyue Bureau.”

Cui Buqu sneered. “It doesn’t matter if you’ve heard of us, as long as Yang Yun has. Yang Yun, as the commandery governor and a relative of the royal family, do you dare claim you’ve no knowledge of the Zuoyue Bureau?”

“Aren’t you Cui-xiansheng, Censor Rong’s aide?” asked Yang Yun after a moment. “When did you become the chief of the Zuoyue Bureau? Rong Qing is willing to murder officials of the court. How do I know you’re who you say you are?”

“You haven’t shown your face once since we arrived,” said Cui Buqu. “How did you know I was Rong Qing’s aide? Could it be that Commandery Governor Yang was in fact apprised of everything, but preferred to wait in the shadows for his prey to stumble into the net?”

This man was as difficult to deal with as the rumors said.

It would be a mistake to engage him in a verbal debate, Yang Yun thought. His face remained as placid as still water, the aura of his office as mighty as a mountain. He remained unmoved. “No matter what you say, Rong Qing is Huang Lüe’s murder—”

“He is a suspect,” Cui Buqu interrupted again. “As long as the Three Judicial Offices have yet to determine his guilt, Rong Qing cannot be called the murderer. I’ve reported this matter to the emperor already; we can expect a reply soon. Until then, Governor Yang may not restrict or detain the censor for any reason.”

Yang Yun’s lip curled. “What a coincidence. Before coming here, I also sent a memorial to the emperor, informing him of the absurd actions Rong Qing has taken here under the guise of his work as a censor. Slandering his colleagues, interfering with relief efforts, deliberately inciting unrest with his lies, and a dozen other crimes!”

Rong Qing couldn’t contain his fury. “You—you’re full of shit!”

Yang Yun didn’t so much as glance at him; his eyes remained pinned on Cui Buqu.

“Huang Lüe lost his life thanks to the censor’s foolishness. As a representative of the people of Guangqian, I cannot sit idly by. Before orders come from above, Rong Qing must be detained. Nobles and officials are subject to the same laws as the people. If later investigation exonerates him, I will ask His Majesty for punishment myself.”

But Cui Buqu refused to compromise. “I’ve already summoned the nearest Zuoyue guards here; they’ll arrive any moment. His Majesty himself asked me to accompany Censor Rong, so I will handle this matter myself. You need not trouble yourself, Commandery Governor Yang.”

Yang Yun narrowed his eyes. Even the dimmest of fools could see the shape of the confrontation unfolding in this room. Neither side would give

an inch. Officials of all ranks watched, their faces alternately blank and full of awe. They remained dead silent, not daring to interfere.

Though Rong Qing was an imperial censor, he was new to his position, and both impulsive and irritable. By himself, he was nothing to worry about. But his fall had drawn out the true deity standing behind him. As the saying went, “In a confrontation between gods, mortals will suffer.” No one wished to be caught in the crossfire. Better to wait for one god to emerge victorious before picking a side.

“Three days,” Yang Yun said finally. “I will give you three days. If they pass without word from the court, I will arrest Rong Qing and bring him in for questioning. You and I can each make our cases to His Majesty!”

Cui Buqu gave him a hard look. “Very well.”

Yang Yun laughed and cupped his hands. “Cui-xiansheng came here in disguise. I apologize for the poor hospitality.”

“Ignorance is not a crime,” Cui Buqu said coolly. “Commandery Governor Yang needn’t be so courteous. Please prepare to have County Magistrate Huang buried properly. I will send someone to investigate the cause of death later.”

“Naturally,” said Yang Yun. “This is a strange and confusing matter. We must bring the truth to light.”

As the two old foxes maintained their too-polite back-and-forth, the tense atmosphere gradually dissipated. Everyone let out a sigh of relief.

Rong Qing’s suspended heart had also temporarily settled in his chest. When Cui Buqu mentioned Huang Lüe’s body, he started to speak, but swallowed back the words. If Cui Buqu could have heard his thoughts, he’d certainly have agreed that Rong Qing had finally grown a little wiser.

Yang Yun didn’t stay long. He and his people departed swiftly, leaving Cui Buqu and Rong Qing alone in the quiet relay station.

Breathing a sigh of relief, Rong Qing turned to say something when he saw Cui Buqu hack up a mouthful of blood, instantly dyeing the front of his robes red.

“Cui-xiansheng!”

Stunned, Rong Qing almost tripped over himself rushing to support Cui Buqu, taking on most of his weight to keep him from collapsing. Only then did he realize the power Cui Buqu projected a moment ago had been an act.

One could hardly blame the censor. Cui Buqu's presence had intimidated even Yang Yun. Had the governor known Cui Buqu was struggling just to stand, forget the three-day grace—he'd have struck while the iron was hot and thrown them both in prison immediately.

There was no need for Cui Buqu to speak. A cold glance was enough to remind Rong Qing of what he'd done wrong. He didn't dare waste his breath justifying himself and confessed everything, his words tumbling out in heap. "I was wrong, Cui-xiansheng! I didn't listen to your advice and acted on my own! That's how I got into this mess. I promise I won't act recklessly ever again. I'll do whatever you say!" Rong Qing swore sincerely, then gritted his teeth. "Yang Yun must be the one behind everything. Huang Lüe died on his orders as well!"

If Cui Buqu had the energy, he'd have slapped Rong Qing on the head at least a dozen times by now. But he was too weak even to berate him; he had to hoard his strength for more important things. "We were attacked at Qixia Villa. Qiao Xian and Guan Shanhai are both seriously injured. I only escaped because they held the enemy back."

Rong Qing's eyes widened in horror. "So Yang Yun really has been watching our every move. Could there be someone around us…"

Cui Buqu shook his head and spoke quietly: "Our top priority is to rescue Qiao Xian and Guan Shanhai as soon as possible. I left them in a cave with no medicine or water. The enemy might find them at any time."

"I'll go with your lordship, and we'll take Xiao-Liu with us. He's very strong; he can help!" Rong Qing nodded to himself, and then asked doubtfully, "You cowed Yang Yun, so why not ask for Huang Lüe's body as well? They're sure to tamper with the evidence."

"We're in their territory. Certainly I could order them not to touch the corpse, but that wouldn't stop them. They'll erase all traces of their involvement and leave no evidence. Give up hope of finding anything on the body."

Rong Qing was silent a moment. “You were lying to Yang Yun about the memorial and summoning the guard, weren’t you?”

Cui Buqu closed his eyes and nodded. “It was the only way to deter him. Any time we can buy is valuable.”

They’d already lost the initiative in this game of chess. Their opponent seemed able to predict their every move, hemming them in at every turn and eliminating any possibility of escape. Cui Buqu was certain he’d seen murderous intent in Yang Yun’s eyes. If not for Yang Yun’s fear that Zuoyue guards really were awaiting orders outside Guangqian County, he would have already taken action.

Traps and enemies surrounded them on all sides. Yet with every move he made, Cui Buqu had a strange feeling of impotency, like punching cotton. This might not be the most difficult dilemma he’d encountered, but of all his enemies, this one certainly knew him best.

Cui Buqu had Xiao-Liu assist him in applying medicine and changing his clothes. It was only when he shrugged off his outer robe that Rong Qing realized Cui Buqu had been stabbed in the chest. Fortunately it was only a flesh wound—there was no internal damage. But it had bled quite a bit, and needed tending with salve and gauze.

After a hasty bandaging job, Cui Buqu left with Rong Qing. They carefully dodged several pursuers before they at last emerged from the city, then ran northward.

To prevent the enemy from finding Qiao Xian and Guan Shanhai’s hiding spot, Cui Buqu had taken advantage of the terrain to secure the area around the cave with a small array. Anyone who entered this part of the forest would become lost, unable to find the cave or leave the trees.

Yet the moment he entered the woods, he frowned. Rong Qing immediately noticed something amiss. “What’s wrong?”

“The array’s been changed.”

“Someone was here before us!” Rong Qing cried.

Regardless of what awaited them ahead, Cui Buqu had to go on—Guan Shanhai and Qiao Xian might still be waiting for him in the cave. Internal injuries could be treated with meditation, but external injuries

healed slowly without medicine. And without water or food, Guan Shanhai and Qiao Xian would quickly weaken.

Even Rong Qing understood what was at stake here. After his shocked exclamation, he quietly followed Cui Buqu.

The fog in the forest was thick; even the bright morning light failed to penetrate it completely. Only the heavens knew why the fog would be so dense at this time of year. A gust of mountain air blew toward them, throwing sand into their faces. Rong Qing squinted and rubbed at his eyes. The motion took him only a second, yet when he opened them again, Cui Buqu and Xiao-Liu were gone.

Elsewhere in the mist, the laughter of young maidens echoed in Cui Buqu's ears.

The voices seemed to waver, first close then far away, like a feather tickling his heart. It was enough to make anyone's imagination run wild. They kept up a constant murmur, yet seemed to be saying nothing at all.

Cui Buqu stilled himself and listened.

Shing—

It was neither the ringing of gong nor a chime, but a sound like someone running a blade along a bell, drawing out a long and lingering note, impossibly shrill. Cui Buqu trembled slightly. The sound drilled into his head like an awl. Pain came instantly, but it was too late to cover his ears; he could only endure as his vision went dark. His chest felt like it was being squeezed, and he longed to vomit blood.

A pair of hands covered his ears.

With their warmth came a protective barrier of internal energy, keeping the zither's assault at bay. From behind, a familiar presence enveloped him.

Chapter 139

MEETING AN OLD FRIEND in a time of crisis ought to have been a relief.

The music of a zither came from all sides, transforming into sharp blades upon reaching his ears. Fortunately, his acquaintance was using his internal energy to shield him from further injury. That ought to have been a relief as well.

But when the person standing behind him said “Guess who,” Cui Buqu couldn’t bring himself to be relieved in the slightest.

The zither paused. For a moment, his ears were at peace.

Apparently the person behind him thought he hadn’t heard clearly, because he removed his hands from Cui Buqu’s ears and covered his eyes instead. “Guess who.”

How could this man be in the mood to joke at a time like this? Cui Buqu struck at the acupoint on his savior’s elbow. The move didn’t require any skill in martial arts—anyone struck there would find themselves with a sore arm. The man chuckled and smoothly removed his hands.

Cui Buqu turned and saw the man he’d expected: Li Shisi.

Or rather, Feng Xiao.

After moving from his hometown to the city, Li Shisi had quickly earned his cousin’s favor. The young man was frivolous and impudent, happy to take both male and female comers. Despite his vices, he was also clever, astute, and knew how to read people. Yet he’d latched onto Cui Buqu at the banquet, disrespected an imperial censor, harassed them, and caused all sorts of trouble. None of this made any sense.

Afterward, this Li Shisi had likely used all sorts of excuses to dodge the Li family’s questions, but to Cui Buqu, he’d already exposed his true identity.

“I seem to remember you invited me to Qixia Villa,” Cui Buqu said slowly.

“So I did. But someone held me up on the way,” Feng Xiao said with a smile. He’d switched back to his real voice.

“Someone who could hold you up so long you missed our appointment? They can’t be an ordinary person.”

“You’re right. He was a formidable martial artist, the kind I rarely see. I fought him for most of the night, but neither of us could defeat the other. I only just managed to extricate myself.”

“Before you obtained the two sarira, how did you compare to him?”

Feng Xiao pretended to consider this. “Before the sarira, perhaps I was a bit below him in terms of raw power—but I have a demeanor that’s graceful, elegant, awe-inspiring, serene, and transcendent. He couldn’t catch up to me in a million years. Even if I’d run into him before the sarira, he’d be helpless against me.”

“Deputy Chief Feng,” said Cui Buqu icily. “The first part was enough. The remaining nonsense can be left unsaid. Who do you think he was?”

Feng Xiao smiled. “If I had to guess…it was Xiao Lü.”

Cui Buqu raised his eyes to look at him.

“You guessed it too, didn’t you?” Feng Xiao asked.

He had indeed guessed it.

Fan Yun had worked with Xiao Lü for a long time. Even if his teacher had his own ulterior motives, upon meeting a young man as talented as Xiao Lü, he would undoubtedly have become excited and tried to teach him some of his martial arts and arrays. He’d often lamented that Cui Buqu was unable to learn martial arts, but this was no obstacle for Xiao Lü. Even if Fan Yun had reservations, Xiao Lü might still have learned much.

Cui Buqu had met Xiao Lü once before, beyond the Great Wall in Duan Qihu’s secret underground chamber. Xiao Lü had played the part of a handsome young man and left a favorable impression on Cui Buqu. In hindsight, Xiao Lü had likely revealed himself solely to meet him. He’d pretended to be searching for his kin, but the identity of the woman he’d rescued wasn’t clear.

Ultimately, Cui Buqu thought, he'd been careless. He'd failed to look more deeply into Xiao Lü and the woman after that incident. Although even if he had, Xiao Lü was intelligent enough not to leave any clues.

During the years he'd spent establishing the Thirteen Floors of Yunhai, Xiao Lü must have had many opportunities to learn all sorts of unique and rare martial skills—more than most people learned in a lifetime. He'd started from nothing and built a powerful organization that extended across both the north and south. Compared to that, acquiring a few high-level techniques was child's play—prodigies were rare, but they did exist.

Cui Buqu was one himself. If not for his superior intellect, he'd have died a thousand times living with the Cui family. He would never have survived to adulthood. And Feng Xiao was one too. He'd achieved incredible things in his study of martial arts while extremely young, his accomplishments far outstripping other rising stars among his peers. He was a martial arts prodigy.

But Xiao Lü's most terrifying quality wasn't his resourcefulness, nor his martial arts. It was his incredible patience. Despite possessing powerful martial arts and founding an organization like the Thirteen Floors of Yunhai, he'd remained in the dark for years, right up until the incident in which the Jade of Heaven Lake had found its way to the Central Plains. Only then—at the moment its rise was imminent—had the tip of the iceberg known as the Thirteen Floors been revealed.

Since Liugong City, Cui Buqu had repeatedly encountered the forces of the Thirteen Floors of Yunhai. Of course this wasn't because he and Xiao Lü were destined to cross paths, but because Cui Buqu had been methodically hunting for traces of their organization. Xiao Lü had realized that if he didn't eliminate Cui Buqu, many of the Thirteen Floors' plans would suffer.

No matter how small a fly was, it was irritating if it kept buzzing around. And the Zuoyue Bureau, which had considerable authority and power within the Sui dynasty, was much worse than a fly. Ever since they'd begun collaborating with the Jiejian Bureau, Cui Buqu had become Xiao Lü's first priority for elimination.

Thoughts racing, Cui Buqu suddenly saw the web Xiao Lü was spinning here. As soon as they'd begun investigating Yang Yun, Cui Buqu

had guessed the Thirteen Floors were lurking behind the scenes. But he hadn't anticipated confronting Xiao Lü himself so soon.

"Just now," he said aloud, "I was thinking how strange it was. Guan Shanhai and Qiao Xian's hiding place is well-concealed, and I left an array to protect them. Even if Xiao Lü pursued them here, he couldn't have found them so quickly and changed my array. So it was because of you."

Feng Xiao entering the fray had alerted the enemy to Guan Shanhai, Qiao Xian, and the array's existence, giving Xiao Lü the chance to change the array. If not for Feng Xiao, Cui Buqu might have found Guan Shanhai and Qiao Xian by now.

Despite accidentally luring the mastermind here, Feng Xiao didn't look the slightest bit sorry. Instead he smiled. "Isn't that convenient? Fan Yun taught you both array techniques, so this is a happy reunion between martial siblings. What better way to celebrate the occasion than a battle of wits?"

Happy reunion my ass, Cui Buqu thought expressionlessly. He suppressed the urge to rip Feng Xiao's head off his shoulders and kick it around like a ball. They couldn't afford to fight among themselves right now—finding Guan Shanhai and Qiao Xian was the first priority.

Even if Xiao Lü had changed the array, it would still take him time to pinpoint Guan Shanhai and Qiao Xian's exact location. If Cui Buqu was fast, he might find them first. Rong Qing and Xiao-Liu were missing as well, but they weren't Xiao Lü's targets.

No matter how talented the creator was, no array was all-powerful. The person Xiao Lü most wished to kill was Feng Xiao, followed closely by Cui Buqu. Rong Qing and Xiao-Liu meant nothing to him, so they were safe. At most they'd get a bit lost.

Cui Buqu sighed. "Does Xiao Lü also know zither techniques? Did he steal them from the Fajing Sect?"

Feng Xiao sighed too. "He's not using the Song of the Heavenly Demon. It has only the form, not the spirit. Besides, couldn't you tell what he was playing?"

Cui Buqu stilled for a moment. Then he remembered. It was "High Mountains and Flowing Water."

The legendary qin player Bo Ya had called his friend Zhong Ziqi the only one who knew the music of his soul. He had composed “High Mountains and Flowing Water” in his honor. After Ziqi’s death, Bo Ya had smashed his zither and snapped its strings, believing there would never again be someone who understood him so deeply.

“He played this song just for you, yet you’re not moved at all?” Feng Xiao asked evenly.

Xiao Lü was arrogant, but he was strangely fond of Cui Buqu. Perhaps he’d revealed himself to Cui Buqu in the first place because Cui Buqu held some special significance for him. Both had learned from Fan Yun. And both suffered from physical impairments: Cui Buqu was born sickly and weak, while Xiao Lü was born with an unsightly disability. They had walked similar paths in life, and they had wills as strong as steel. They accepted no compromises from fate and would never rest until they achieved their goals.

It made sense that to Xiao Lü, Cui Buqu’s existence was unique. Whether as longstanding friends who knew each other’s hearts or as enemies who saw themselves reflected in one another, they would always share an indefinable connection.

But then—why did Feng Xiao’s tone sound a bit off?

Cui Buqu frowned. “Enough nonsense. Let’s see what changes he made to the array.”

So saying, he took a few steps forward. The fog grew denser, and women’s laughter rang out again. He took a few steps back, and the women’s voices disappeared, replaced by the bustling sounds of a city, with vendors hawking their wares and pedestrians hurrying along. They seemed to come alive through the sound: Cui Buqu could almost see them. But as the cacophony grew around him, the fog thickened again. Cui Buqu had found the exit earlier, but now a strong wind blew past, and the path changed. The trees before him became huge boulders, blocking his way.

Someone grabbed his wrist.

Feng Xiao had been at his side the entire time.

“The sounds are interfering with my ability to break through the array,” Cui Buqu said in a low voice. “He played for us earlier—think you

can return the favor?”

Feng Xiao’s lips parted, seemingly without sound. In fact, the words passed directly to Cui Buqu’s ears so that only he could hear them. “I can, but I don’t have a zither.”

There was the zither Yuyin that he’d extorted from Cui Yong, but Feng Xiao had thought it too conspicuous to carry around. He’d removed only the strings to use as weapons; the body was supposedly back in the capital. But now Feng Xiao didn’t have it when they needed it. How could anyone play a zither without the body?

“Give me your hand,” Cui Buqu heard him say.

Cui Buqu stilled. He’d already realized what Feng Xiao planned to do. After a pause, he obeyed.

Feng Xiao wrapped one end of the zither’s five strings around Cui Buqu’s forearm, then held the other set in his hand.

To use one’s body as the zither, one’s heart as the song.

Feng Xiao lifted a hand and plucked the strings.

Zing!

The zither’s notes were gentle and clear. Its music came in bursts, transforming into sharp arrows of sound as they shot forward.

Cui Buqu felt a stinging pain in his arm. He lowered his head to see that the strings had cut through his sleeve and into his skin, which was blooming with red marks. But Feng Xiao’s playing didn’t stop. Each note was followed by another, and another. The sound of the zither surged outward, infused with qi, like an army of soldiers charging through all obstructions, as imperious as the player himself. Where the sound waves passed, the fog dissipated, scattering like smoke.

The corner of Cui Buqu’s mouth twitched. He suddenly realized Feng Xiao wasn’t playing random notes, but a song he knew—“The Male Phoenix Seeks His Mate.”

An utterly demented, chaotic, and frenzied rendition of “The Male Phoenix Seeks His Mate.” Any female phoenix would lose their feathers in terror on hearing this version of the song.

Cui Buqu gasped in surprise. The swirling, foggy maze ahead of him disappeared, and the disturbing voices vanished. It was as if they had been transported back to the beginning of time, where only the purest of melodies abided.

The array had been destroyed completely.

Though Feng Xiao had launched a counterattack with his music, it was only to stop Xiao Lü's assault. He'd done nothing to the array itself. Yet the eye of the array was gone, and without it, the maze lost all potency, vanishing into thin air.

This certainly wasn't Xiao Lü's doing.

Feng Xiao stilled his movements. "He's gone."

Xiao Lü knew he stood little chance of victory if he confronted Feng Xiao head-on, so he'd simply walked away. They were equally matched enemies, and the future stretched before them.

As long as Xiao Lü remained in the dark, Cui Buqu would never know peace. Xiao Lü would see every move Cui Buqu made, and Cui Buqu would lose any chance of taking the initiative. But right now, Cui Buqu wasn't seeking a direct confrontation with Xiao Lü. He breathed a small sigh of relief.

Feng Xiao pulled away the strings, now stained with Cui Buqu's blood. Then he grabbed Cui Buqu's sleeve and used it to wipe the strings clean.

Cui Buqu was speechless. But before he could react, Feng Xiao caught his wrist. He pushed up Cui Buqu's wide sleeve, revealing the five bloody marks on Cui Buqu's forearm where the zither's strings had lain.

In the next moment, Cui Buqu went stiff.

Feng Xiao had lowered his head, and, bit by bit, was licking the blood away.

The prickling sensation of Feng Xiao's tongue grazing his wounds made Cui Buqu reflexively yank his hand back. But Feng Xiao's grip was tight; Cui Buqu's wrist didn't budge an inch.

Cui Buqu raised his foot and aimed a kick at Feng Xiao's groin. But Feng Xiao seemed to have anticipated this too, and lightly tapped an

acupoint on Cui Buqu's thigh with his free hand. Numbness swept up Cui Buqu's leg, and his knees buckled. Feng Xiao took the chance to loop an arm around his waist, and a faint flush spread over Cui Buqu's pale cheeks.

Feng Xiao felt Cui Buqu was quite striking this way—he looked almost bashful. Only Cui Buqu knew if this was truly the case; Feng Xiao certainly wasn't going to ask him.

"Cui-xiansheng!" Rong Qing shouted from a little distance away.

Before Cui Buqu could lose his temper, Feng Xiao laughed and released his wrist. Rong Qing was rushing over with Xiao-Liu in tow.

"Cui-xiansheng, are you all right?" He could see Cui Buqu's complexion was even worse than usual.

"It's nothing." Cui Buqu had already pulled down his sleeve. "How did you find me?"

"I walked around in the array for a long time, until I met Xiao-Liu. We couldn't find you anywhere. Xiao-Liu got so angry he ripped out a flower and kicked some pebbles around. Right after that, the fog vanished somehow, and we found you!"

Cui Buqu was stunned. "You just happened to destroy the eye of the array."

He didn't know what to call this. Fool's luck? A blind cat running into a dead mouse?

"What a coincidence!" Rong Qing said in surprise, while Xiao-Liu laughed awkwardly and scratched his head.

Cui Buqu didn't dally. He quickly found Guan Shanhai and Qiao Xian hiding in the small cave. It truly was small—there was barely enough room for two people to sit inside it hunched over. But the dense forest outside the cave had provided good cover, concealing their location.

Guan Shanhai was meditating with his eyes closed, while Qiao Xian was alert. When she saw Cui Buqu appear, her eyes lit up. "Lord Chief!"

Cui Buqu turned back to Rong Qing and Xiao-Liu. "Take one each. We'll carry them back."

Rong Qing pointed to himself. "Carry them? Me?"

“Who else?” said Cui Buqu. “Me?”

Rong Qing glanced at Feng Xiao, dressed in a spotless white robe and waving his fan as if he was out for a pleasant stroll through the woods.

“Censor Rong, allow me to introduce myself. I’m sure you’ve heard of Feng Xiao, the deputy chief of the Jiejian Bureau. And if you haven’t, well, now you have,” Feng Xiao said with a smile.

Rong Qing’s face twisted, as if he’d just learned he’d eaten day-old pork and couldn’t spit it out. He cupped his hands toward Feng Xiao. “The lowly official Rong Qing greets Deputy Chief Feng.”

Wonderful. Everyone present held a higher rank than he did, excepting his attendant Xiao-Liu. Rong Qing stepped up to Guan Shanhai, resigned, and pulled him onto his back.

Yet Cui Buqu’s next words drove away all his fatigue, leaving him fully alert once again.

“Now only two and a half days remain.”

Chapter 140

RONG QING'S GOAL on this trip had evolved from merely investigating a case to preserving his own life.

If he'd previously thought Yang Yun lacked the courage to kill an envoy of the court, he no longer doubted his ruthlessness. The county magistrate Huang Lüe was dead, and this was Yang Yun's territory. Li Yan, Wu Yi, and the others all obeyed Yang Yun. In truth, it would be all too easy to have Rong Qing quietly killed.

Perhaps he had been washed away by the flood, or fought with Huang Lüe over an unequal division of profits. Yang Yun would have no trouble concocting a perfectly plausible cause of death after ridding himself of Rong Qing. As a relative of the emperor, he enjoyed a level of deference from the royal couple. Even if they enlisted another censor to continue the investigation, the newcomer might lack the resolve to pursue the truth. This would create only more opportunities for Yang Yun to manipulate the situation.

Cui Buqu was thus the most significant variable—only if Cui Buqu was safe would his own safety be guaranteed.

They sat in the relay station, Rong Qing still in shock. Cui Buqu seemed to sense his thoughts and mercilessly splashed another pail of cold water over him.

"I almost lost two of my men already. You saw it too: They won't scruple to kill even me. If we discover nothing more in these two and a half days—if I can't offer an explanation to His Majesty—Yang Yun will make an example of you." Cui Buqu spoke his next words with deliberate emphasis. "Whatever you're imagining, they're capable of that and more."

Rong Qing felt a chill go through him. "How could they be so audacious?! All this, just to embezzle some grain?"

Feng Xiao laughed. "Isn't that like telling someone they should eat meat porridge when there's no rice? Granaries are the backbone of a nation. Rice is more valuable than gold during a famine—and even gold can't buy

you food if there's none to be had. But once this flood recedes, the grain can be stored, and it'll last at least a decade. They can trade it for even more valuable things."

Rong Qing had also realized he'd said something foolish. His face was hot as he asked, "What things?"

"Salt. Iron," said Cui Buqu.

"Does Yang Yun mean to rebel?!" blurted Rong Qing.

When he'd first arrived, Rong Qing had only known this was a serious disaster, and worried that the local officials might be negligent in their duties. He'd planned to supervise them closely, keenly watching their every move. Later, he'd begun to realize things were far more complicated than he'd thought. Officials of all ranks were colluding to embezzle grain, but he never guessed they would be so insane as to rebel against the emperor. The situation had escalated far beyond anything he'd imagined.

"Maybe not rebel," amended Cui Buqu. "But they certainly can't escape the charge of corruption." He glanced at Feng Xiao. "I have a question for the Deputy Chief: What are you doing here?"

Feng Xiao sighed. "Oh, little Cui-langjun. We're old friends reuniting in a strange land. Must you take such a tone?"

Cui Buqu smiled faintly. "Very well, old friend. If you don't wish to say it now, you can keep it to yourself forever. Don't bother telling me. After all, it's not my life that's in danger. Worst case, when the Zuoyue guard arrives, I'll simply dust off my hands and walk away. Poor Censor Rong will have to shoulder all the blame himself. Perhaps he'll lose his own insignificant life…"

Shaking all over, Rong Qing looked toward Feng Xiao. His flat, square face was wrenched into a pitiful, aggrieved expression, like a small animal frightened for its life.

Unfortunately for him, Feng Xiao had killed even the lovely Feng Xiaolian without a second thought. He didn't feel the slightest bit of sympathy for a grown man like Rong Qing. Rather, his eyes had been fixed on Cui Buqu the entire time—especially on his arm where it had been sliced by the strings. He had yet to change his clothes, and the raw welts were still

exposed. Feng Xiao's gaze lingered there almost indecently, so intense it seemed to burn into Cui Buqu's skin.

Cui Buqu's expression darkened.

In principle, Feng Xiao reflected, it was like teasing a cat or a fox. The animal would jump about at first, eyes on the reed in your hand, and it made for good entertainment. But when the fox got frustrated and tried to claw at you, it was time to stop. A few scratches were a small matter, but it would be a great loss if the animal developed a grudge.

Feng Xiao quickly schooled his face to seriousness. "I received an anonymous letter."

He produced the missive and put it on the table. Cui Buqu picked it up and unfolded it. Only two lines were written on the paper:

On the highlands, I feel right at home.

The treasured jade my lord covets so.

The first line came from a historical record from the Han dynasty entitled *Shiji*. "Home" referred to Fangling Province, modern-day Guangqian County. Rong Qing didn't understand the significance of the second line, but Cui Buqu and Feng Xiao both saw at once that it was about the Jade of Heaven Lake.

"Is this that old man's handwriting?" Feng Xiao asked.

Of course he meant Fan Yun.

"He knows many kinds of calligraphy—regular, cursive, and seal script—so I couldn't say. But this person must know the whereabouts of the Jade of Heaven Lake. If it's not Fan Yun, it's a member of the Thirteen Floors."

Feng Xiao shrugged. "Wouldn't it be stranger if I didn't come?"

Cui Buqu arched a brow. "Li Shisi?"

"I just happened to find out that the Li family has an incompetent son named Li Shisi," Feng Xiao said with a smile. "They had enough of him fooling around in his hometown, so they sent him to the city to put him to work. I intercepted him while he was en route and used the technique Changing the Skies, Substituting the Sun to steal his face, assuming his

identity. Honestly, he should be grateful. How else could he manage to get into the eldest son's good graces in a few days, and even be taken under his wing?"

Feng Xiao hadn't yet been included in the core affairs of the Li family, but he was adept at navigating social situations and extracting information through indirect means. In a short time, he'd amassed quite a bit that was useful—such as the strange happenings at Qixia Villa. Li Shisi's identity, when used well, was an excellent tool. Unfortunately, now that he'd been exposed, he had no choice but to emerge from the dark to work out in the open.

Feng Xiao looked at Cui Buqu, his meaning plain: *Your turn.*

"Half a month ago," Cui Buqu began slowly, "when you gave me that list of names, several people on it caught my eye. One of them was Yang Yun. I thought there was something odd about him, so I looked into his political achievements in Guangqian Commandery over the past few years. That was when I discovered something odder still."

Cui Buqu wasn't one to overreact. If he said he found something strange, it must have been truly alarming.

Feng Xiao reclined on his side with his chin propped in one hand, the picture of indolence as he awaited Cui Buqu's next words. But Cui Buqu didn't look at him—his gaze instead landed on Rong Qing. At the censor's blank expression, Cui Buqu had to resist the urge to smack him. He turned his gaze back to Feng Xiao.

He ignored Feng Xiao's sputtered laugh and said, "Guangqian has been plagued with disaster since ancient times. Since the first year of the Kaihuang era, Yang Yun used the floods and poor harvests as an excuse to suggest a policy of waiving taxes for those who contribute grain to the commandery's stores. In effect, the prominent families donate food to their own people during lean times, and in exchange, they're exempted from taxes the following year. In this way, the commandery supports itself with no need for government aid."

"Ah," murmured Rong Qing. He did recall hearing about this some years ago. At that time, the emperor had been pleased and praised Yang Yun for his ingenuity. Not only did his plan relieve the imperial court's burden with regard to distributing foodstuffs, it even saved the court money. This

approach was completely different from the rest of the commanderies and counties. Of course, the emperor's commendation was also likely a way for him to remind the court that his family, too, had promising descendants. Rong Qing recalled that the emperor had wanted to promote Yang Yun, but his relation had declined, protesting that promotion had to follow regulations, and that he didn't want preferential treatment. The emperor hadn't been displeased at being rebuffed—instead, his appreciation for Yang Yun grew.

Even without the promotion, Yang Yun would likely rise steadily in the ranks over the next few years. He'd enter the central government and have much greater power within his grasp.

"However"—Cui Buqu's voice broke through Rong Qing's churning thoughts—"when I sent people to investigate Guangqian County, they found that though there was plenty of rain in the last two years, it never caused floods on this scale. Which is to say, there was no need for the families of the county to donate any grain."

Cui Buqu spoke his next words carefully: "Yang Yun set up a donation policy for tax exemption. But even if the grain was donated, it wasn't needed by the locals—so where did the surplus grain go? After the flood this year, the imperial court disbursed grain to Guangqian, but Huang Lüe said it wasn't enough. If the court's contributions are insufficient, why not use the grain they've hoarded for the past two years?"

"In other words," Rong Qing murmured, "Yang Yun has been deceiving the court for two years, and all the surplus grain went into his own pocket?"

"Perhaps," Cui Buqu said. "Or perhaps not. Whatever the truth of the matter is, Huang Lüe must have had inside knowledge of this scheme, or even been one of the participants. Otherwise, there'd be no reason to kill him. But Huang Lüe alone isn't capable of running such a huge operation for Yang Yun. Li Yan and Wu Yi are almost certainly involved as well."

"That's right," said Feng Xiao. "And the Li and the Ding families must have benefited from this tax exemption policy, so they were in on it too."

Rong Qing sprang up, agitated. "Then we should target Li Yan and Wu Yi; find an opening there. And there's Qixia Villa—if they're storing

that much rice there, it'll take some time to move it all. We can take people there now and surround the place. It's not too late!"

Feng Xiao shook his head. "It is too late."

Before Rong Qing could ask what he meant, Xiao-Liu, who was supposed to be outside gathering news, burst in drenched in sweat. "My lord, there's a fire north of the city. Everyone's talking about it!"

Rong Qing's heart stuttered in his chest. He couldn't help but glance at Feng Xiao and the others. "North of the city where?"

Xiao-Liu gesticulated wildly. "They said halfway up the mountain. If I had to guess, it must be around Qixia Villa. The fire is huge! You can see the smoke from inside the city. It's still raining elsewhere, yet this place caught fire. Misfortune truly never comes alone!"

Forgetting everything else, Rong Qing ran outside the relay station. He didn't need anyone to guide him—he could see the black smoke rising in the north. A single glance told him the size of the conflagration. Even if the villa's residents were working to put out the fire, it'd be impossible to extinguish quickly. But they wouldn't be trying to put it out. They'd rather let the fire rage until it consumed everything in the villa.

All that rice…

When Rong Qing thought how many refugees the rice could have saved, his heart ached. There would be nothing left in Qixia Villa, an important lead snuffed out.

Two days were left. Yang Yun had ruled uncontested here for many years. What could they do in a mere two days? Rong Qing had never been at such a loss.

That evening, the group met once more, and everyone split up to work on their own tasks.

Guan Shanhai and Qiao Xian stayed in the relay station to recover from their injuries. Feng Xiao discarded his disguise as Li Shisi and left to look for Huang Lüe's relatives, though this was likely to be of little help. There was no guarantee Huang Lüe had left any other clues before his death. Cui Buqu departed to investigate Li Yan and Wu Yi, two key figures in the matter of the grain embezzlement. They too had relatives and

connections within the county. For instance, Cui Buqu had learned that Li Yan was keeping a mistress outside his household without telling his tigress of a wife. Perhaps this was a new lead they could follow.

As for Rong Qing, he was writing a memorial to the emperor.

Although the facts of the case were far from clear, he didn't know where he'd be in two days. To prevent Yang Yun from burying everything, a memorial delineating their findings and asking for the emperor's intervention was vital.

Rong Qing sat in the courtyard in a daze. One thought loomed large in his mind: However powerful the enemy might be, they couldn't hide all the grain. Qixia Villa had burned, but traces must remain elsewhere. And then there was the matter of the refugees. Guangqian County was the seat of government in Guangqian Commandery. The victims who'd camped outside the city were desperate and must have come to plead for help. Yang Yun and his faction couldn't have silenced everyone; there had to be survivors. But where were they?

If they could find even one or two, they'd have living witnesses.

Xiao-Liu came over carrying a pot of stew. "Your lordship has hardly eaten or slept the past few days. I can see you've grown thinner. I borrowed the kitchen here and cooked some pigeon soup for you. Drink it while it's hot!" he said.

The aroma of warm soup pulled Rong Qing out of his abstraction. His spirits lifted a little, and he said with a smile, "Well, I haven't tasted your cooking since we left the capital. How could I refuse?"

He lifted the lid and inhaled deeply.

"What's that smell?"

It was Cui Buqu, who'd walked in through the open gates. Rong Qing was too embarrassed to drink the whole bowl in front of him, so he held out the pot. "Pigeon soup. Would you like a sip, Cui-xiansheng?"

Cui Buqu glanced at it and said unceremoniously, "All right." He took the pot with both hands and lowered his head to drink.

Cold steel flashed behind him—a dagger glinted in Xiao-Liu's hand as he soundlessly swung it down on Cui Buqu's back.

Chapter 141

XIAO-LIU HAD SEEN Feng Xiao leave the relay station with his own eyes and knew he wouldn't be back anytime soon. Even if Feng Xiao did sense something and rush back, distant waters couldn't extinguish a nearby fire—he would never make it in time to save Cui Buqu.

As for Rong Qing, his view was completely obstructed by Cui Buqu, whose neck was bent as he prepared to drink the soup. He had no idea what was going on.

Xiao-Liu knew Cui Buqu was fairly lucky. But beyond dumb luck, it was his sharp intellect that kept him alive. Time and again, crises had transformed into opportunities, mostly thanks to Cui Buqu's knack for foreseeing danger and deftly manipulating his environment. But now, his guards were incapacitated and far away, leaving only the useless Rong Qing at his side. Whom, then, could he rely on for help?

The edge of the poisoned dagger gleamed. Xiao-Liu's hand was steady, decisive, and lightning fast. Just as the knife was about to plunge into Cui Buqu's back, the smirk on Xiao-Liu's lips froze.

A hand was clasped firmly around his wrist.

A strong gust of wind surged around him, and Xiao-Liu was forced to abandon the prize within his grasp to turn toward the new threat. How had this man appeared so suddenly? He must have been lying in wait, observing Xiao-Liu's every move in secret.

Rong Qing was stunned. Moments ago he'd covered his mouth to stifle a yawn, yet now chaos had erupted all around him. Even if Xiao-Liu didn't want Cui-xiansheng to drink the soup, there was no need to resort to violence!

Wait, when had his attendant acquired such formidable skills? And who was the man fighting him?!

Xiao-Liu found his strikes blocked from all directions. Despite the vastness of the courtyard, he was soon forced into a corner. The attacks from his assailant were relentless, though the man's martial arts were

nothing special. Xiao-Liu was an accomplished assassin but knew little martial arts; his attacker's abilities were more than enough to pin him down.

Having lost the element of surprise, killing his target would be nearly impossible. But failing this mission would mean his death—turning back was not an option.

Adrenaline surging, Xiao-Liu gritted his teeth and, disregarding the blows raining down on him, switched directions midair to lunge toward Cui Buqu.

It was a gamble. He was betting on his speed, hoping to eliminate Cui Buqu before his foe could intervene. Xiao-Liu pushed his qinggong to the limit, but couldn't close the distance between himself and Cui Buqu. In desperation, he hurled the dagger.

It shot through the air, aimed squarely at Cui Buqu's shoulder. By the time Cui Buqu sought to evade, it was too late. Yet just as the dagger threatened to sink into his flesh, a rush of air knocked it aside, sending it clattering harmlessly to the ground with a crisp, bright sound. Hot soup splashed over the stone as the pot fell alongside the dagger and shattered into countless fragments.

Xiao-Liu caught Rong Qing's bewildered gaze and nearly coughed up blood in frustration.

But the tables had turned. Before he could make his next move, his opponent was upon him. Pain erupted in his back as a powerful kick sent him crashing to the ground, blood spilling from his mouth. His vision went dark. In the next moment, his arms were twisted painfully behind him, rendering him immobile.

"Dislocate his jaw!" Cui Buqu cried.

He had immediately seen through Xiao-Liu's intentions. Blindsided, Xiao-Liu found himself unable to bite down on the poison hidden in his mouth, drool pooling in a humiliating puddle as he struggled. If not for the hatred burning in his eyes, he would have looked ridiculous.

"This isn't Xiao-Liu," Rong Qing exclaimed in disbelief. "Where's the real Xiao-Liu? What did you do with him?!" He shook the assassin with all his might, but the man merely sneered.

Pei Jingzhe—for it was indeed he—breathed a long sigh of relief and finally stood up straight. The stinging pain at his waist made him grimace, and he was almost unable to maintain his dignified image as a member of the Jiejian Bureau.

In fact, Pei Jingzhe had arrived in Guangqian County alongside Feng Xiao. His skills had thus far gone unused, since where martial arts were needed, Feng Xiao could do a better job. After Feng Xiao's identity was exposed, Pei Jingzhe had become a hidden pawn, patiently waiting for his moment to shine.

Earlier that day, Feng Xiao had departed, and Cui Buqu had instructed Pei Jingzhe to furtively follow him around instead. Pei Jingzhe had concealed himself in various out-of-the-way spots—closets, rafters, trees, anywhere he could remain unnoticed—to the point his back was about to snap from crouching in so many tight spaces. Fortunately, Cui Buqu hadn't been aiming to torture him. Xiao-Liu soon exposed himself, allowing Pei Jingzhe to spring into action and be freed from swallowing more mosquitoes.

Cui Buqu's analysis had likewise proved correct: Xiao-Liu's martial arts were unimpressive. Their foe was simply using the assassin to eliminate Cui Buqu. Pei Jingzhe alone was enough to thwart him.

In the meantime, Rong Qing had shaken Xiao-Liu with such force that the man vomited a second mouthful of blood. Yet the assassin still refused to—or perhaps could not—reveal where the real Xiao-Liu had gone.

"He likely replaced the real Xiao-Liu when you entered the array in the forest," Cui Buqu explained.

"He was with me for six full years, and followed me from my hometown to the capital." Rong Qing slowly released the assassin, turning away with reddened eyes. "He was honest, tactful, and a good cook."

Pei Jingzhe felt a pang of sympathy. He patted Rong Qing's shoulder. "We'll avenge him."

Now Rong Qing understood. Cui Buqu had sent everyone away to make it more convenient for Xiao-Liu to attack. Suspicions were only

suspicions, after all, and not enough to justify arresting and interrogating Xiao-Liu.

“Cui-xiansheng, once this matter is resolved, I want to search for Xiao-Liu,” he said. “I need to find him, whether alive or dead. Even if he’s… I should still take him home for a proper burial.”

“That’s fine.” Cui Buqu wasn’t so cold that he’d refuse such a request—as long as it didn’t jeopardize the mission.

Pei Jingzhe stepped forward. Using a wet cloth, he gently rubbed the disguise from the assassin’s face. A translucent layer peeled away along with most of Xiao-Liu’s honest face, revealing the gaunt visage of a stranger.

“Do you want to torture him?” Pei Jingzhe asked. An idea struck him. “Perhaps I should ask Qiao-niangzi to disguise me as Xiao-Liu. They won’t know he hasn’t yet made a move, and we can wait for them to contact me. It could lead us to another clue!”

Cui Buqu shook his head. “It won’t work. First, he’s an expendable agent; he knows nothing beyond the target of his mission. Second, this type of disposable soldier is meant to be used but once. If he fails to act, our foe will realize something is off. They won’t contact you.”

“Then what should we do?” Rong Qing piped up, asking Pei Jingzhe’s question.

They were like turtles trapped in an urn, unable to glimpse the outside world and relying on instinct to blindly flounder their way forward. Even if they managed to fumble their way through this challenge, another would be waiting. They couldn’t guarantee they’d come out safe again.

Even worse, they were running out of time. Yang Yun had issued an ultimatum, and in two days, he planned to act on it. But in actuality, he’d already made his move. Huang Lüe’s death, the burning of Qixia Villa, the unknown fates of the missing refugees—their leads were dead and their information piecemeal, while the enemy’s defenses felt impenetrable.

Their defeat seemed a foregone conclusion. Rong Qing couldn’t think of any way for them to turn the tide.

He looked at Cui Buqu hopefully. “When will your Zuoyue guard arrive, Cui-xiansheng?”

Cui Buqu cast him a sidelong glance. His response was shocking. “I only said that to intimidate Yang Yun. I never called for them.”

Rong Qing froze stiff with alarm. He couldn’t be blamed for his reaction. He hadn’t been a censor for long, and Guangqian was his first official assignment outside the capital. It was meant to be a straightforward trip escorting aid, yet instead he’d found himself up against a deadly enemy. Even such titans as the Zuoyue Bureau’s Chief Cui and Deputy Chief Feng were ensnared here, to say nothing of the insignificant Rong Qing. If they didn’t get to the bottom of this case, grim fates awaited them all.

Of course, Rong Qing hadn’t known about the treachery lurking under the surface in Guangqian County, nor about the Thirteen Floors pulling the strings. He’d only thought Yang Yun so prideful that he found even an imperial envoy beneath his notice. After all, how could one man create such chaos and wield such power? Only later, as the complexities of the case unraveled before his eyes, did he begin to understand how very out of his depth he was.

Pei Jingzhe was momentarily taken aback. “If your lordship doesn’t summon the Zuoyue guard, we’re alone here. Qiao-niangzi is still injured. If Yang Yun truly intends to slaughter us all, I won’t be able to protect your lordship, even if I offer up my life.”

Cui Buqu calmly raised a finger. Pei Jingzhe stared at it with wide eyes, trying with all his might to decipher what Cui Buqu meant by this gesture. But Cui Buqu simply wagged it at him: “You’re thinking about it all wrong.”

Pei Jingzhe was silent. Perhaps he had grown too accustomed to Cui Buqu’s icy expression when he traded barbs with Feng Xiao. For a moment, he struggled to believe Chief Cui could also be so childish.

But the next words from Cui Buqu’s mouth were exceedingly grave. “The Zuoyue Bureau has no manpower to send.”

Pei Jingzhe gaped at him. “How can that be?!”

The Zuoyue Bureau was an elusive organization. But while Pei Jingzhe knew they didn’t have as many personnel as the Jiejian Bureau,

they still maintained secret sentries stationed in various locations throughout the Northern dynasty, and even a few in the Southern dynasty. The capital alone must house several hundred members of the Zuoyue guard. A few hundred ordinary people were nothing more than a mob, but Zuoyue guards underwent rigorous training. A few hundred of them represented the best of the best. If Cui Buqu managed to summon those guards here, then no matter what Yang Yun wished to do, surely this would give him pause.

Cui Buqu noticed Rong Qing's confused expression and explained, "Before the flood recedes, news will continue to travel slowly. Even if I summoned my people, they would have to take a detour north of the city, just as we did when we arrived. Even if they rush here as quickly as possible, it will take them several days to reach us. By then, the time Yang Yun gave us will be up, and it will be too late."

Pei Jingzhe found this reasoning unconvincing—so unconvincing it didn't sound like Cui Buqu at all.

Cui Buqu, aren't you the one who always anticipates the enemy's moves and wins by surprise? Why are you now acting like you're blindfolded and bound?

But Cui Buqu continued, disrupting his uncharitable thoughts. "In the few sentences you said just now, you mentioned Qiao Xian twice." Cui Buqu looked at him, a faint smile tugging at his lips. "Do you miss her that much?"

"N-no!" Pei Jingzhe stuttered out a protest. Suddenly he didn't know what to do with his hands.

"She misses you too."

Pei Jingzhe's eyes lit up.

"I lied."

He stared as Cui Buqu continued, "She's recovering and should be able to walk now. If you wish, perhaps you should go visit and help her resolve some of her concerns."

Pei Jingzhe's cheeks were aflame, his eyes darting to the side. He'd been about to change the subject, but now he couldn't help wanting to know

more.

Since they'd first met in Liugong City, that celestial maiden in white had left a lasting impression on him. Unfortunately, despite his interest, Qiao Xian remained aloof. She was as cold as she was beautiful, and little Pei-langjun was too thin-skinned to pester her. Since returning to the capital, whenever the Jiejian and Zuoyue Bureaus had needed to communicate, Pei Jingzhe had eagerly volunteered himself in hopes of exchanging a few more words with Qiao Xian.

If no one gave him a push, he would continue spinning in circles for the rest of his life.

Pei Jingzhe felt a surge of emotion.

"Go on," Cui Buqu urged again.

With his face flushed red, Pei Jingzhe looked like a young boy brimming with affection but unsure how to express it. He excused himself and walked stiffly inside.

Curious, Rong Qing asked, "What concerns does Qiao-niangzi have?"

Since she and Guan Shanhai had returned, Rong Qing had barely seen them. He felt there was something strange about Cui Buqu bringing Pei Jingzhe and Qiao Xian together now, though he couldn't pinpoint exactly what.

Cui Buqu smiled faintly. "Why, does Censor Rong also yearn for Qiao Xian?"

"Not at all! Not at all!" Rong Qing frantically waved his hands. It had only been a casual question. He pointed to the assassin, still on the ground. "What should we do with him?"

He was answered with a bright laugh as Feng Xiao strode in. "Cold, steamed, braised—you can prepare him any way you like!"

The chilly courtyard seemed to grow several degrees warmer. Cui Buqu blinked. He had to admit this fellow's beauty was truly exceptional, lovely enough to captivate all of creation. Simply standing there, he looked like a god. There was no need for him to speak—indeed, it was best if he never spoke at all.

“Cui-xiansheng,” Feng Xiao said, “I couldn’t help but notice your gaze lingered on me a bit longer than usual just now.”

Sure enough, that irritating voice spoiled the moment. Feng Xiao stopped at the threshold of the courtyard, expertly choosing his angle. Sweet-scented osmanthus flowers drifted onto his shoulders. The tilt of his fan and the motion of his wrist as he waved it were meticulously calculated, effortlessly elegant yet carefully restrained to prevent the delicate flowers from falling to the ground.

“Would you like me to stand here a bit longer so you can savor the view?”

“That won’t be necessary,” Cui Buqu replied coldly. Next time, he thought, he wouldn’t give this man so much as a second glance.

Feng Xiao seemed to sense his thoughts, and a slight smirk curved his lips, as if mocking Cui Buqu’s resolve.

Cui Buqu looked down, irritated. “I presume Deputy Chief Feng has returned with good news?”

“Indeed I have,” Feng Xiao said with a smile. “I did a charitable deed, and Li Yan’s wife was most grateful. It turns out that good intentions really are rewarded.”

He tossed the bundle he was carrying onto the stone table.

Rong Qing was left utterly baffled by this exchange, but Cui Buqu merely sighed. He no longer expected this peacock with his tail raised sky-high to be capable of proper conversation. Rather than respond, he explained the situation to Rong Qing.

Guangqian County had embezzled significant amounts of grain for three consecutive years. It was impossible that they’d erased all traces of their deeds. Huang Lüe had likely been silenced because he knew too much—perhaps he’d even had key evidence. Though he was dead, whatever records he’d kept wouldn’t simply vanish. They would be transferred to another conspirator, such as Li Yan or Wu Yi.

People’s hearts were often surprisingly predictable. Just as Yang Yun had used Huang Lüe while keeping a wary eye on him, Huang Lüe’s death had sounded the alarm for Li Yan and others. They would surely scramble

to secure some evidence, either to leverage against Yang Yun or to ensure their own safety.

No matter how perfect a plan might be, there would always be vulnerabilities. The more intelligent the planner, the more contingencies they would prepare for. Cui Buqu wasn't concerned about them overthinking; on the contrary, he feared they wouldn't think enough.

As long as the enemy had a weakness, there was still a chance for them to turn the tide.

They'd learned Li Yan was keeping a mistress outside his home. His wife had a fierce temper, so he didn't dare let his family know and had concealed the affair from everyone. If Feng Xiao didn't use this knowledge to incite chaos, he simply wouldn't be able to live with himself. Via the Li family servants, he'd discreetly passed evidence of Li Yan's infidelity to his wife Lady He, including the address of the house he'd purchased for his mistress.

Despite her fury, Lady He had remained surprisingly level-headed. Rather than reacting immediately, she waited until Li Yan went out to visit his mistress there, then burst in and caught him in the act. She'd chased both the mistress and Li Yan through the courtyard with a rolling pin, startling the neighbors and creating a terrific scene.

Li Yan, overwhelmed with guilt, had begged Lady He for forgiveness. She dismissed his pleas and ordered the servants to turn the manor upside down. Li Yan grew so furious he almost fainted. When he gathered his courage and attempted to reason with his wife, she struck him on the head with her rolling pin so hard he passed out cold.

Evidence of Li Yan pampering his mistress was everywhere in the manor, including the many gifts he'd showered upon her. Upon seeing these, Lady He's anger intensified. She ordered the servants to ransack the place, smashing what they could and confiscating whatever gold, silver, and jewelry they found.

Meanwhile, Deputy Chief Feng sat in the rafters, watching the mayhem unfold. He had a perfect view of the Li family servants turning the house inside out, allowing him to spot anything Li Yan might have concealed there related to the grain.

It was obvious Li Yan doted on his mistress and feared his wife more than he respected her. When people had secrets to hide, they often concealed them where they themselves felt most comfortable, believing these were the places of greatest safety. Cui Buqu and Feng Xiao understood this well, which was why they'd chosen the manor as their first target.

But nothing was certain. If they found no clues there, they would have to turn their attention to Wu Yi.

Fortunately, this time, their guess was correct. Feng Xiao untied the knot on the bundle, freeing several scrolls, which tumbled off the table. There under the clear blue sky, the scrolls unfurled, revealing their contents to the half-conscious assassin.

The man's eyes went wide in disbelief, and a trickle of blood slid from his nose. Apparently, he was an assassin with a pure and innocent heart.

The images on the scrolls were portrayed with exquisite lines and a vibrant array of colors. They depicted myriad scenes, from folding screens in manors to grape trellises in courtyards, from carriages to bustling brothels to taverns that teemed with onlookers. The paintings featured men and women of every sort, all engaged in various intimate acts—some bashful, some wild, some coy, some fiercely resistant. There seemed to be no limit to the painter's imagination.

Rong Qing stood dumbfounded as he pointed at the paintings, stammering, "This—this—this…"

Cui Buqu said nothing. It was the first time he'd ever felt so ignorant and uninformed in his life.

Feng Xiao was laughing, proudly flaunting his spoils. "What do you think? Admit it, even you're shocked."

Cui Buqu's face was expressionless. "After crouching in the rafters for half a day, *this* is the key clue you found?"

Chapter 142

FENG XIAO LOOKED back at him, the picture of innocence. “Form is emptiness, emptiness is form. You’ve strayed from the path of enlightenment, Cui-xiansheng.” He tapped the paintings with his fan. “On the surface they look like erotic paintings, but in fact, they are hiding something much more meaningful.”

On hearing these words, the assassin fell into deep thought. If these weren’t ordinary erotic paintings, what kind of extraordinary paintings were they? Could there be some profound martial arts forms hidden within those poses? *If I’d discovered those paintings earlier, could I have escaped the fate of an assassin and embarked on the path of a martial arts master?*

Feng Xiao had no idea his casual words had prompted such soul-searching. But unlike the assassin and Rong Qing, who was likewise shocked beyond words, Cui Buqu lived up to his reputation. He hadn’t been led astray by Feng Xiao, and after a moment’s silence, he discovered a hint within those lurid scenes: The faces of the men depicted were all, without exception, the same.

“Did Li Yan hire someone to paint him and his mistress enjoying themselves?”

“Clever!” Feng Xiao struck his palm with his fan. “I told you, they’re not ordinary erotic paintings!”

Custom erotic paintings featuring oneself as the subject. It was certainly a niche interest. Li Yan had looked very serious and proper when they met him; who could have known he was so broad-minded behind closed doors?

“Did you see where they took these scrolls from?” Cui Buqu asked.

Feng Xiao smiled. “As expected, you’ve cut to the heart of the matter. The paintings were packed in a box, and the box was hidden beneath a floor tile beneath a bed. The tile had been covered in heavy boxes, all of them filled with gold and silver jewelry. Li Yan’s salary would never allow

him to accumulate so much wealth, even if he worked for another twenty years."

Cui Buqu pondered this. "These paintings are shameful, but they're not valuable. He hid the worthless pictures in the safest place but left the more valuable gold and silver jewelry in the open. Strange, to say the least."

"I agree. After his wife knocked him out, I stayed until Li Yan woke up. What do you think was the first thing he did when he woke?"

Cui Buqu raised his eyes and looked at Feng Xiao.

When Cui Buqu focused on a person, his eyes were particularly bright. Sharp and cold, yet with a hidden sentimentality to them, like flowing spring waters concealed beneath ice and snow.

Feng Xiao had only meant to take a single look, but found himself taking an additional two or three. It wasn't until Cui Buqu raised an inquisitive brow that he coughed lightly and continued, "When Li Yan woke up, he didn't look at the gold and silver scattered on the ground. Nor did he run around to find out how much of his property had been stolen by his wife's servants. He went straight for the box containing the erotic paintings. Lady He thought he was still attached to them and became so furious she chased him out again." Feng Xiao clicked his tongue. "You should have seen it; it was *quite* the commotion!"

"Records." Cui Buqu ignored Feng Xiao's gloating and said succinctly, "These paintings are the records we're looking for."

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"They took the records!" Li Yan wailed.

Wu Yi looked at Li Yan's bruised and swollen face. His nose was leaking snot. Wu Yi moved a little further away, then tossed over a handkerchief and said in disgust, "Wipe it!"

Li Yan couldn't have cared less. He was in a full-blown panic over losing something so important. "I checked everywhere. The servants refuse to admit they took them! They're a pile of worthless paintings. Even if they

stole them, they couldn’t sell them. What in heaven’s name did they do with them?”

Wu Yi sneered. “Who told you to hide such an important thing in erotic paintings? And you kept them locked away even more securely than the gold and silver. Doesn’t that make it obvious they’re valuable?”

“How could I have known Lady He would bring so many people!” Li Yan wept piteously. “Any normal thief would never have found them! What do we do now? You’re the one who said we should keep the records to blackmail Yang Yun. Well, Yang Yun will be fine, and we’ll be the ones in hot water!”

“Pull yourself together!” Wu Yi said coldly. “What does it matter if they find the location in the records? The governor has planned for everything. They went to Qixia Villa, and you saw what happened there. So what if the Zuoyue Bureau stands behind Rong Qing? Even the most powerful dragon can’t defeat a snake in its own garden. As long as the governor doesn’t wish for them to find anything, they won’t!”

For a moment, Li Yan was stunned. His befuddled expression, coupled with his two black eyes, looked exceedingly ridiculous, but his appearance was the least of his worries. “Do you know something?” he asked hurriedly. “What did Yang Yun—no, the governor—say to you?”

“Just before you arrived, I paid him a call. He told me we could rest easy.” Perhaps Wu Yi was in a good mood. Despite looking down on the cowardly Deputy Magistrate Li Yan, he poured him a cup of wine. “In a few days, everything will be tied up neatly.”

Li Yan became only more confused. “Neatly? How can it be neat? Even if they don’t find the grain stores, doesn’t Huang Lüe’s death indicate some sort of foul play? The governor said he’ll ensure they take all the blame, but it can’t be that simple! It all hinges on whether His Majesty believes him, and whether the court believes him.”

“And what if neither the censor nor anyone backing him is alive to testify?” Wu Yi asked darkly.

Li Yan trembled. His eyes were so swollen he could hardly open them. Even trying with all his might, he could only widen them a crack.

Through those cracks, he saw that Wu Yi's smile had become sinister. "What are you proposing?"

What can you do with no guts? At least Huang Lüe had the courage to play double agent; this Li bastard sniveled and cried like the sky was falling when his paperwork was stolen. He was more useless than a vengeful woman. Wu Yi cursed him inwardly, yet his expression remained amiable as he pushed the wine across the table to Li Yan.

"It's not what I'm proposing; it's what the governor's proposing."

"What does that mean?" Li Yan said suspiciously.

"Rong Qing's memorial will never be delivered. As for the Zuoyue Bureau, even if Cui Buqu files a complaint, we have people in the capital who will smooth things over. Cui Buqu has the trust of the empress, but the governor is a Yang. If we didn't have allies in the capital, could our operation have gone as smoothly as it has? The only new variable this time is Cui Buqu. If Rong Qing had come alone, this would have long been resolved." Wu Yi paused before continuing confidently, "As for the other members of the Zuoyue Bureau, we needn't worry about them. The governor has made plans to silence them permanently. It's all over once you're dead—at that point, right or wrong is determined by others."

Li Yan took in Wu Yi's confident expression and said nothing. Wu Yi hadn't been like this two days ago. He'd been just as anxious as Li Yan, just as terrified that their crimes would be exposed and that Yang Yun would make them scapegoats. Yet suddenly, he seemed almost a different person. The only possible explanation was that he knew something Li Yan did not.

Cui Buqu was the empress's trusted aide, while the Zuoyue Bureau served as her teeth and claws. But Wu Yi had insinuated that none of this mattered to Yang Yun at all. Li Yan had thought that since the chief of the Zuoyue Bureau had come in person, he must have martial experts at his side. Although Yang Yun held immense power within Guangqian Commandery, he might not have the charisma to attract his own experts and annihilate Cui Buqu in a single strike. Unless…

Unless there was a greater power behind Yang Yun. A larger, more complicated organization, far beyond Li Yan's imagination.

Li Yan felt a chill run up his spine.

He snatched up the cup of wine and downed it in a gulp, hoping it would calm his nerves. But as the wine slid down his throat, his heart raced faster. “Did the governor say when the dust will settle?”

Wu Yi held out two fingers.

“Within two days?”

Wu Yi smiled mysteriously.

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“The paintings have no interlayers.”

“There’s nothing hidden in the scroll either.”

“Then the key must be within the images themselves.”

Had anyone opened the door at this moment, they would have thought they’d entered some low-class brothel by mistake. The tables, floor, and walls were all plastered with erotic paintings.

Unfortunately, no beautiful women graced the room, but two men.

They sat facing each other, expressions stern as they carefully examined the paintings—or, more precisely, Cui Buqu looked stern. Feng Xiao would never stand if he could sit, and never sit if he could lie down. He reclined against a plump cushion, one leg drawn up as he admired the paintings he’d found in Li Yan’s mistress’s residence.

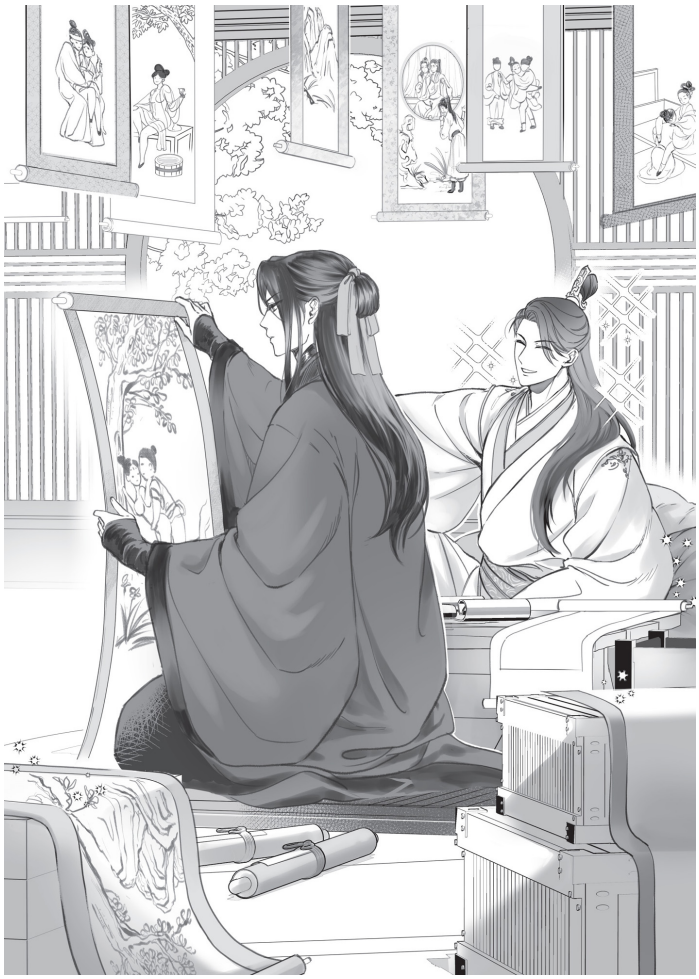
“Honestly, where did he get the idea? If I were Li Yan, I would never think of hiding account records in dirty paintings.”

“Then no tigress will chase you all over the yard any time soon,” Cui Buqu said without looking up.

Feng Xiao laughed. “I didn’t expect Cui-xiansheng to love them so much he’d be unwilling to put them down. If I’d known you liked this sort of thing, I’d have sent you a heap of them. You could look to your heart’s content.”

“If you were in the painting, I wouldn’t just like it,” Cui Buqu retorted. “I’d give copies to the entire Zuoyue Bureau. Everyone would get

one, guaranteed.”



Feng Xiao nodded. “And what if the other face were yours?”

Cui Buqu gave him a look that said, *Would you like to die standing or lying down?* and spoke coldly: “I know where the records are hidden.”

Feng Xiao perked up, no longer invested in their bickering. “Where?”

“Right here.” Cui Buqu pointed to the painting in front of him. “It’s signed third year of the Kaihuang era, twenty-first of the twelfth month. That date is in the future. Why would Li Yan sign a date two months in advance? If you look at the painting again, you see these two people *copulating in the wild*. There’s a mountain in the distance and a villa halfway up the slope. Isn’t that Qixia Villa?”

Feng Xiao almost fell to the ground laughing at how seriously Cui Buqu said copulating in the wild. Before Chief Cui could make any vicious remarks, he tucked away his smile and took a serious look at the painting. “You think the date represents an amount of grain?”

“At least one of the numbers does. We’ve been to Qixia Villa, so we can recognize it. This painting is the easiest to interpret. As for the rest…” Cui Buqu looked around the room. “I can identify three more places at the moment. Fengyun Tavern, Zhao’s Teahouse, and a villa belonging to the Ding family. Identifying the rest would probably require someone familiar with all the pavilions and houses in the streets and alleys of Guangqian County—but we don’t have that much time. The third one, the Ding villa, is on the southern outskirts of the city. The area’s flooded, so we can eliminate that one. That leaves only Fengyun Tavern and Zhao’s Teahouse.”

“How did you recognize those two?” asked Feng Xiao curiously.

Cui Buqu pointed to his own forehead with a slender finger. “Before I arrived, I looked at a map of Guangqian County and roughly memorized all the landmarks in the city. On my arrival, I walked the streets. But I can only remember these two locations.”

Merely reading a map and seeing the actual place one time had been sufficient for Cui Buqu to match the names with their respective locations and commit them firmly to memory. Remembering even a single place was impressive; few others—Feng Xiao included—would have recalled even that much.

But the Zuoyue Bureau didn’t need others. One Cui Buqu was enough.

Feng Xiao had witnessed this ability of Cui Buqu’s countless times by now, yet each time, he found himself struck by surprise and a little admiration. The things Cui Buqu paid most attention to were the details others often ignored. Those details might seem useless to most, but there was always a chance they’d come in handy. And sometimes, they determined the difference between victory and defeat.

“Fengyun Tavern or Zhao’s Teahouse. Pick one,” Cui Buqu said.

Feng Xiao scowled. “Why me? I’ve worked for days pretending to be Li Shisi. I pretended to be someone’s grandson, fought Xiao Lü at Qixia Villa, and now you want me to be your errand boy?”

“Then should I go? I don’t really care,” Cui Buqu said evenly. “I’m merely worried that if I don’t die from fatigue on the way, I’ll be felled by a single strike once I arrive.”

Feng Xiao sneered. “Don’t try that with me. Get your Qiao Xian to go!”

“Qiao Xian is injured.”

“She’s injured, not missing her arms and legs. She can handle one more fight. If she can’t win, she can simply run away. You cherish your beloved subordinates so, but you won’t spare a mote of concern for me? Is that it?”

Without warning, Feng Xiao leaned in, catching Cui Buqu off guard. He was so close Cui Buqu could feel the warm puff of his breath. Cui Buqu tried to retreat, but Feng Xiao grabbed the back of his head and held him firmly in place. Their eyes met. Slowly, Cui Buqu blinked. The jut of his throat bobbed, the motion so small it was almost imperceptible.

Before Cui Buqu could get angry, Feng Xiao laughed and pulled back first. “Cui Buqu, you’re blushing!”

“It’s hot in here,” said Cui Buqu expressionlessly.

Feng Xiao brushed aside his excuse. “You really are fascinated by my beauty. You’re only pretending you’re not!”

“I’m not. Pick one. I’ll send Guan Shanhai to the other.”

“You’d rather send Guan Shanhai than Qiao Xian, even though his injuries are more serious? Do you really treasure her that much? Or could it be”—Feng Xiao drawled the words, heavy with implication—“that you suspect her?”

Cui Buqu said nothing.

Feng Xiao smacked his fan into his palm. “Every time you show that blank expression, I know I’ve got it right. I never thought you’d suspect her. Since when?”

Before they’d left the capital, Cui Buqu had entered the palace to meet Empress Dugu and inform her of his investigations regarding the Thirteen Floors of Yunhai. When Empress Dugu asked him what help he needed, he’d asked for a person.

Everyone thought Guan Shanhai had been forced upon him by the empress, and that his presence proved she didn’t trust Cui Buqu. No one had guessed that Cui Buqu had asked for Guan Shanhai himself.

Despite this misunderstanding, neither he nor Guan Shanhai had clarified things to anyone. The misunderstanding was precisely what they needed.

Feng Xiao had also originally drawn the same conclusion, but he’d quickly discarded it. From what he knew of Empress Dugu’s personality—not to mention her trust in Cui Buqu—she didn’t need to control her officials and aides via such ham-fisted methods.

Guan Shanhai wasn’t here to monitor Cui Buqu. He was here to monitor Qiao Xian.

Chapter 143

"WHEN DID YOU begin to suspect her?"

"Ever since you told me on Mount Tiannan that there was a traitor close to me."

Feng Xiao arched a brow. "I thought you concluded it was Fan Yun."

"I did at first," said Cui Buqu. "Fan Yun is most familiar with my past, which is why the Thirteen Floors of Yunhai set that trap for me in Boling. But I gradually discovered that they not only knew my past but also my current whereabouts—where I was going and what I was going to do. The Thirteen Floors of Yunhai always seemed able to predict where I'd be and lay traps before I arrived."

"They knew your plans before you went to Qixia Villa."

Cui Buqu nodded. "No matter how clever Xiao Lü is, he's not a god. It's impossible for him to know every detail of my movements. The only explanation is a traitor close to me. And this traitor can't be any ordinary Zuoyue guard because the enemy is practically following my every footstep."

"But that doesn't prove it's Qiao Xian."

"It doesn't," Cui Buqu agreed. "That's why I took her and Guan Shanhai with me on this trip. I came to Guangqian Commandery in secret. Other than my two guards, only Empress Dugu knew; even Rong Qing and his attendant only learned the news just before setting out.

"When Rong Qing arrived in Guangqian County, he encountered obstacles at every turn. He was deceived and ambushed by Huang Lüe and the others, and even accused of murder. His attendant Xiao-Liu also died, which shows Rong Qing cannot be from Xiao Lü's faction.

"Guan Shanhai was handpicked by me. His family has been with the army for three generations; he has little connection to the capital and a clean background. No matter how superhuman Xiao Lü is, his reach can't possibly extend to Guan Shanhai. That leaves only Qiao Xian. It must be

her. She's been secretly sending messages to our enemies, passing my whereabouts to them and facilitating their attacks."

Feng Xiao chuckled. "She doesn't know you have a card up your sleeve. She's had countless opportunities to attack you, but she never took them. She's still sentimental about your relationship."

"I was already on guard against her, so I never gave her the chance," Cui Buqu said placidly. "If she wants to kill me, she won't succeed. I never entrust my back to those I suspect."

Feng Xiao clapped his hands. "Now there's the ever-decisive Cui Buqu! But I wonder—" He leaned forward on his elbows and stared at Cui Buqu. "Would you entrust your back to me?"

Their gazes collided; Cui Buqu couldn't avoid it. They were so close he could see his reflection in Feng Xiao's eyes, almost filling them.

There was a moment of silence.

"Cui-xiansheng, did your lordship find…" Rong Qing rushed in, but his voice died as he noticed the strange atmosphere in the room.

They both turned their heads, and Rong Qing forced a stiff smile. "The two gentlemen can…please continue chatting. I'll come back later!"

Without waiting for them to reply, he whirled around and left, fleeing like someone had set fire to his tail.

Feng Xiao reached out and grabbed Cui Buqu's chin, slowly turning his gaze from Rong Qing back to himself. Cui Buqu unceremoniously slapped the back of his hand hard—and missed. Feng Xiao had pulled his hand back faster.

Cui Buqu sneered. Slowly he said, "I will never entrust my back to an arrogant, conceited narcissist."

Feng Xiao laughed aloud. "Cui Buqu, you can list so many of my virtues! Doesn't that prove you care for me, and that I value you?"

"Feng-er, have you ever heard this saying?"

"I'm all ears."

"The first to ask, loses."

Feng Xiao nodded. “You’re saying you originally wanted to ask me the same thing. I knew it—even though you’re a mean-spirited person who acts aloof and detached and never takes my feelings seriously, you still have to bend in the face of a singularly elegant young master like myself.”

Cui Buqu gave him an incredulous look. “How can a person as shameless as you exist?”

Feng Xiao sighed. “You are jealous of my grace, envious of my unfettered freedom.”

The “jealous and envious” Cui Buqu looked like he’d been force-fed a rotten egg and made to swallow the foul thing lodged in his throat. The corners of his mouth twitched as he said, sincere, “Feng-er, sometimes there’s something I really want to do to you.”

“Feel me up?” said Feng Xiao. “Molest me? Degrade me?”

“Turn you mute with poison. Your face by itself is appetizing enough.”

Feng Xiao laughed. “That won’t work. If I’m mute, who can match you in a battle of wits?”

“Xiao Lü could,” said Cui Buqu.

“A scoundrel who skulks about in the dark, refusing to show himself?” Feng Xiao pressed his lips together. “Can a firefly’s glow outshine the moon? If you knew Qiao Xian was working for him, why didn’t you do something about it? Are you letting out the line to catch the big fish?”

Cui Buqu was silent a moment. “Four years ago, when we met, she was wretched and miserable.”

“She might have been pretending,” said Feng Xiao.

“She had many opportunities to attack me when we were alone together along the way, but she never did.”

“To make it more believable,” Feng Xiao said. “If you can’t bear to do it, allow me.”

“No need. I’ll give her a chance and let her choose,” Cui Buqu said.

Feng Xiao sighed. “Cui Buqu, a cold man with a warm heart!”

Cui Buqu sneered. “Feng Yuntian, a flower in love with its own petals.”

“I’d prefer you to describe me as a dashing man of grace.” Feng Xiao snapped open his fan and rose. “I like drinking wine, not tea, so I choose Fengyun Tavern. But what’s your next move? They’ve likely made preparations at these two places. We have no idea if it’s truly a new lead or another trap. Cui Buqu, the master strategist—surely you’re not sending Guan Shanhai and me into the enemy camp by ourselves, are you?”

Cui Buqu shrugged. “I’ve no cards left. Xiao Lü has me at the end of my tether. Why else would I ask to borrow Pei Jingzhe? I even hoped to ask you to mobilize some Jiejian Bureau eagle riders to help us get through this.”

“I’m sorry, but there’s no manpower left at the Jiejian Bureau either. Otherwise why would I, the deputy chief himself, make a personal appearance?” Feng Xiao shot him a penetrating look, as if he wished to pry into Cui Buqu’s innermost thoughts. “It’s not like you, Cui Buqu, to leave yourself no recourse.”

Cui Buqu sighed. “Yang Yun is getting restless. Xiao Lü is worried about dragging things out. They’re sure to make a move within the next two days, and it’s too late to call the Zuoyue guard from elsewhere. Even the wisest man, considering a thousand possibilities, can still make a mistake. Against this powerful enemy, I might even pay with my poor, insignificant life.”

Feng Xiao also sighed, his gaze sympathetic. “Cui-langjun’s situation is truly tragic this time.”

“No less tragic than yours,” Cui Buqu said sorrowfully.

The two sly foxes looked at each other, one sitting, one standing, both wearing the same pained smile.

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Another room. Another two people.

One wore a blank expression almost identical to Cui Buqu's as she stared at the newcomer. The other shrank further into himself the more she stared, at a loss for what to do.

"You seem unhappy," Pei Jingzhe said carefully.

Qiao Xian finally spoke. "When did you get here?"

Pei Jingzhe breathed a quiet sigh of relief. "I came with my lord; he asked me to assist Cui-xiansheng. Someone tried to assassinate him just now, but I stopped him."

"Who sent them?" she asked, her aloof expression faltering. "Is the lord chief all right?"

"He's fine. But since the enemy didn't succeed, they're certain to try again," he answered honestly. "I'm afraid I can only do so much with my martial arts. Next time, he might not be so lucky."

Without thinking, Qiao Xian rose from the bed and put on her boots. Pei Jingzhe hurried to stop her. "Now that my lord is here, all you need to do is rest and recover!"

"Of course. With Feng Xiao here, why should I worry?" Qiao Xian said with a self-deprecating laugh.

There was obviously another implication beneath her words. Pei Jingzhe couldn't help but observe, "You seem extremely prejudiced against the deputy chief."

Qiao Xian pursed her lips and said nothing, as if this action alone was sufficient to express her endless disgust.

Blinking, Pei Jingzhe cast about for something else to say. "After my last trip with him, he almost docked my pay."

Sure enough, Qiao Xian frowned. "Is the Jiejian Bureau so poor they need to cut their subordinates' pay?"

Pei Jingzhe smiled. "It wasn't a pay cut. It's because I performed poorly, and my lord punished me for it."

"Feng Xiao is so stingy!" Qiao Xian muttered.

Pei Jingzhe smiled again. "He often threatens such things, but he almost never follows through. I consider him a father as much as a master.

Without him, there's much I would never have learned—maybe I'd still be a foolish, confused boy who knows nothing about the world. What about you? How did you join the Zuoyue Bureau and start working under Cui-xiansheng? He's never given his trust easily, so those who earn it must be outstanding."

He didn't know which of his words had struck Qiao Xian, but she immediately froze.

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"So all we can do is sit back and wait for them to make a move?"

Feng Xiao had departed for the tavern, while Pei Jingzhe had disappeared to speak with Qiao Xian. Rong Qing and Cui Buqu sat under a tree playing chess. The former was restless and absent-minded. After a few matches, he couldn't resist asking this question.

The relay station was very quiet. It was the middle of the day, yet the building felt empty of people.

"No." Cui Buqu shook his head.

Rong Qing's hopes rose.

"They're the wolf, and we're the rabbit." As Rong Qing stared, Cui Buqu amended, "Ah, that's not right either. Together, you and I make two rabbits."

Rong Qing smiled bitterly. "I've already written the memorial and sent someone to deliver it with all haste."

"Have you prepared a copy?"

"No, why?" Rong Qing asked in confusion. "What's wrong?"

"Your memorial will never arrive," Cui Buqu said sympathetically. "If we're lucky enough to survive the next few days, you'll have to write another one. It would have been easier if you'd made a copy."

Rong Qing was speechless. He stared at Cui Buqu for a long time, then couldn't help saying, "Why are you so sure my memorial won't arrive? I even specially gave the courier an extra letter; once he arrives in the

capital, he can go to my residence and collect a bonus. He'll rush there as __"

He never finished the sentence. Rong Qing heard a swift rush of air, and watched in horror as an arrow whistled over the wall and nailed itself into a nearby pillar.

The entire front third of the arrow was buried in the wood, a thick letter attached to the shaft. Rong Qing recognized the memorial he'd sealed and handed to the courier himself. The fletching of the arrow was dull, and the letter was stained with blood. A lock of hair was attached to it.

Rong Qing whipped his head back around to look at Cui Buqu.

"This is just the beginning," Cui Buqu offered.

Rong Qing didn't know what to say.

Chapter 144

QIAO XIAN still remembered the rainy night when she'd first met Cui Buqu.

She'd just been expelled from her sect and had nowhere to go. As she trudged down the road, she saw a lantern shining bright and warm through the dark night.

The lantern belonged to a relay station on the outskirts of the city, meant for travelers who arrived after nightfall and had to wait for the gates to open in the morning. Beneath the lantern sat a small stall selling hot soup. Business was slow tonight; besides the stall owner, there was only one other person.

The man looked sickly, his movements slow. He sat quietly, looking at the hot soup on the table, lost in thought. When he raised his head, he happened to meet her probing eyes.

Through the thick curtain of rain, Qiao Xian heard the man say, "Would you like a bowl of hot soup?"

"All right," she replied.

Many in the Zuoyue Bureau laughed at her over-dependence on Cui Buqu. Some even speculated she was secretly in love with Chief Cui. Qiao Xian had scoffed at the rumors; she didn't need to explain herself. Cui Buqu had helped her when she was at her most desperate, taken her in, taught her, and made her Qiao Xian of the Zuoyue Bureau instead of Qiao Xian the traitor, at whom everyone spat and cursed.

If Feng Xiao was the person Pei Jingzhe most revered, then Cui Buqu was the same for Qiao Xian. In gratitude for his guidance and tutelage, Qiao Xian was willing to brave fire and flood.

But there were some forces even she was helpless to refuse.

Four years ago, she hadn't anticipated how terrifying that helplessness would become. Things had spiraled out of her control, like a

horse throwing off its reins: Once it broke free, it could never be easily restrained again.

She had thought she was on a mountain road, and that despite the intermittent crags and bumps, it would take her steadily upward. Only now did she realize she'd been wrong. The road had led her to a cliff, and she was standing at the precipice. The road back was cut off. She could neither advance nor retreat, and didn't know what to do. The abyss was waiting for her below with its bloody maw stretched wide, ready to engulf her at any moment.

"Qiao-niangzi?"

"What did you say?" Qiao Xian murmured, returning to her senses.

"I said, if there's something on your mind, you don't have to tell me, but why not talk to Cui-xiansheng? He has lots of ideas. I'm sure he'd help you find a solution." Perhaps because he had an arrogant and insolent boss like Feng Xiao, Pei Jingzhe was especially gentle and patient.

Qiao Xian lowered her lashes. "What if even the lord chief can't help me?"

Pei Jingzhe blinked. He'd begun to understand why Cui Buqu had sent him here. "It's not too late to make amends."

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Rong Qing hadn't anticipated that Cui Buqu's prediction would come true so quickly.

The relay station seemed to have an invisible boundary drawn around it. The enemy outside hadn't stormed in just yet, but they would do everything possible to kill them from without.

The same afternoon the bloodstained memorial was returned undelivered, four assassins snuck into the relay station's courtyard.

They were men of some skill—had Rong Qing been alone, he would have died several times over. Luckily, Pei Jingzhe led two eagle riders to

capture three of their attackers, and though the fourth man escaped, it was with serious injuries. He probably wouldn’t survive for long.

In the evening, someone set a fire in the backyard. While everyone was fighting the fire, their assailant took advantage of the chaos to poison the food in the kitchen. Cui Buqu caught him in the act and had him seized.

The two consecutive attacks sent everyone into a panic. Cui Buqu dismissed all the servants, leaving only the people from the Zuoyue and Jiejian Bureaus. The relay station became quiet again.

Although Rong Qing was frightened, Cui Buqu, his superior in rank and authority, remained unruffled. His calm was infectious, and Rong Qing gradually regained his composure.

Day passed into night. Feng Xiao had yet to return, and there was no sign of Guan Shanhai. Pei Jingzhe gradually began to feel the pressure, like a noose tightening around them. A greater storm was brewing.

As the last dusky clouds on the horizon were engulfed by darkness, the world welcomed a moonless night, lit only by the flicker of lamps. When Pei Jingzhe entered the main hall, he found Cui Buqu sitting by the fire, warming himself and reading a book. Surprisingly, he seemed truly absorbed; he wasn’t holding the book just for show. Pei Jingzhe watched him turn a page, his lips curving slightly in amusement.

“Is Cui-xiansheng reading something funny?”

Pei Jingzhe approached the brazier but found himself sweating almost immediately. He took a few steps back and chose a seat farther away. Although it was autumn, the weather was still mild; most people didn’t need a brazier in these temperatures. But Cui Buqu feared both the heat and the cold, and he felt more comfortable next to the fire.

“It’s a short classic about two brothers fighting over a wife,” he answered.

Pei Jingzhe couldn’t believe Cui Buqu was in the mood to read at a time like this. “Sir,” he blurted, “my lord has been gone most of the day. When do you think he will be back? Is he in danger?”

Cui Buqu shook his head. Pei Jingzhe was about to breathe a sigh of relief when Cui Buqu followed up with, “Of course he’s in danger.”

“Then why did you shake your head?” Pei Jingzhe’s mouth twitched.

“I shook my head because I don’t know when he will return. You can comfort yourself with this: The good die young, while the wicked live to a thousand.”

Pei Jingzhe was speechless. He wanted to argue that his lord was a good person, but he realized that by Cui Buqu’s logic, he’d be cursing him to die before his time. Cui Buqu and Feng Xiao were nemeses forced to share a narrow road. When they were together, they couldn’t be comfortable unless they were needling each other. Pei Jingzhe had long grown numb to their antics.

“Sir, there’s something I don’t understand. None of the assassins they’ve sent have been especially skillful. This doesn’t seem like the Thirteen Floors of Yunhai’s style. Shouldn’t they have much more potent methods? Or have I overestimated them?”

“You haven’t overestimated them.” Cui Buqu finally put down the book. “Those assassins were not from the Thirteen Floors of Yunhai.”

“What do you mean?”

Cui Buqu raised two fingers. “Yang Yun and the Thirteen Floors are not working as closely as it appears.”

Since their arrival in Guangqian Commandery, the enemy had made several moves: They’d held a banquet to win over Rong Qing, then killed Huang Lüe preemptively and blamed it on the censor. They’d severely wounded Guan Shanhai at Qixia Villa, stalled Feng Xiao, and even tampered with Cui Buqu’s array, then sent a series of incompetent assassins, one after another.

Sometimes the moves were brilliant, outmaneuvering Cui Buqu and his allies at every turn. Yet at other times they were painfully mediocre, even foolish. It was clear these were not the work of the same mind.

“Yang Yun and Xiao Lü are cooperating—but there’s no master-subordinate relationship here. Yang Yun has his own plans and won’t obey Xiao Lü without question, while Xiao Lü is keeping a low profile and waiting for the right opportunity. He’s exceptionally patient: He either doesn’t attack at all, or he holds nothing back. The assassins must therefore be Yang Yun’s doing.

“We’re at a disadvantage now,” he continued, “but Yang Yun doesn’t know that. He’s unsure what cards we have up our sleeve, so he’s testing us to find our limits. Once he’s confident we can’t retaliate, he’ll swoop in to annihilate us. He won’t allow us to return to the capital alive. But just because Yang Yun takes action doesn’t mean Xiao Lü will too. Yang Yun is itching to get started, but Xiao Lü is in no hurry. He’s still our most dangerous enemy.”

Now Pei Jingzhe understood the strange feeling he couldn’t put his finger on before. In just a few words, Cui Buqu had smoothed away the doubts he couldn’t articulate.

“So we should wait for Xiao Lü to act?”

Cui Buqu shook his head. “Xiao Lü is still biding his time because Yang Yun has yet to make his killing move. Yang Yun will definitely exhaust his strength to bury me here.”

“My lord hasn’t returned yet, and Guan Shanhai is missing.” Pei Jingzhe looked grave. “The two Zuoyue guards who came with you have also been sent off. Now only I, Qiao Xian, and two eagle riders remain in this relay station. We can handle five or six assassins, but Yang Yun might have far more than that. If he sends a dozen, things will get difficult.”

Cui Buqu laughed. “A dozen? Now you’re underestimating Yang Yun. He’s been operating in Guangqian Commandery for three years. He used the grain provided by the court and the money from the prominent families here to fund a private army. He will have also benefitted from his cooperation with Xiao Lü. A few assassins, the fire—those were all just tests. Yang Yun might not be able to mobilize an entire county’s worth of soldiers, but a few hundred people will be more than enough to besiege this small courtyard and lay waste to it.”

The longer Pei Jingzhe listened, the paler his face grew. “Then… should I go search for my lord now?”

Cui Buqu smiled thinly. “I’m afraid it’s too late.”

He’d hardly finished when Pei Jingzhe heard a deep rumble like muffled thunder. It rolled in from the distance, but the final thunderclap never came. With a start, he realized that it wasn’t thunder at all—it was the

sound of mounted soldiers galloping toward them. From the sound alone, there were several hundred at least.

On the battlefield, a few hundred soldiers would be engulfed in an instant. But those numbers were more than enough to surround a relay station and kill a handful of people. It was like using a sledgehammer to crack a nut.

Pei Jingzhe was an above-average martial artist and might even be considered a second-tier expert. But in the face of such a large force, even he might not be able to flee safely—let alone bring Cui Buqu and Rong Qing out with him.

Several methods of escape flashed through his mind and were promptly discarded. “Cui-xiansheng, we have two options. Either you can make a run for it while Qiao Xian and I protect you, or you can hide in the cellar with Censor Rong while we deal with them. You can come out once the coast is clear.”

Pei Jingzhe’s voice quavered slightly with nerves. The thunder of hooves grew closer and closer; the soldiers would be outside the door at any moment.

“No,” Cui Buqu said. “That’s too cowardly. It lacks boldness.”

Pei Jingzhe thought he was going mad. *At a time like this, preserving your life should be good enough! What boldness do you need?!* Aloud he asked, exasperated, “Then do you have any better ideas?”

Cui Buqu cocked his head and thought for a moment. “How about I use my peerless grace to make them kneel and beg for mercy?”

Face blank, Pei Jingzhe wondered for a moment if Cui Buqu was actually Feng Xiao in disguise.

Someone pounded on the door, the sound shaking the whole building on this silent night. The doors of every house around the relay station were shut tight. No one was willing to lose their life for the sake of a little curiosity.

Pei Jingzhe was so anxious his teeth were chattering. He was just about to drop everything and stuff Cui Buqu into the cellar with Rong Qing when Cui Buqu rose and smoothed out the wrinkles in his clothes.

“I jest; that’s what your oleander spirit would say. Let’s go.”

“Go where?” Pei Jingzhe asked automatically.

“To welcome our guests.”

Rong Qing trailed after them without saying a word. He’d experienced all sorts of ups and downs over the past few days, enough stormy waves to make up for the past twenty years of smooth sailing. He’d gone from panic and terror to a calm that was almost numb. But his mind had also grown much clearer, and he was no longer prone to the same impulsivity. Xiao-Liu’s death had prompted him to think much more deviously about how to deal with the enemy. He was willing to give up decision-making power and let Cui Buqu give orders. In any case, even if he screamed his throat raw right now, no one would listen to him.

Their enemy continued to pound on the door, seemingly about to break in at any moment.

Outside, Yang Yun was sitting high astride a horse. He raised a hand, and the banging on the door stopped. “Cui Buqu, I know you’re inside. As long as you surrender yourself, everyone else will be safe.” He didn’t need to shout. The night was so quiet he was certain Cui Buqu could hear him.

The only reason he hadn’t simply broken down the door was a fear of walking into one of Cui Buqu’s traps. He’d heard much about the insidious Zuoyue Bureau chief, but had never dealt with him directly. Many of the tales had come from the Thirteen Floors of Yunhai themselves.

At the thought of the Thirteen Floors, Yang Yun felt a spike of annoyance.

Just as Cui Buqu had surmised, the relationship between Yang Yun and the Thirteen Floors was not that of a subordinate and a superior, but one of mutual cooperation. Bluntly, they were using each other.

When the Thirteen Floor of Yunhai had first approached him, they had taken a fancy to his restless ambition and proposed a grand plan for him. But Yang Yun was wary of inhibiting his own plans and uninterested in becoming a puppet dancing on their strings. Thus he had carefully negotiated a relationship of cooperation. In this way, he hoped to leverage the power of the Thirteen Floors of Yunhai to pave a path for himself without becoming overly involved with them.

But the members of the Thirteen Floors weren’t fools. Yang Yun had flouted them one too many times; since the day before yesterday, they’d cut off communications with him. Yang Yun didn’t know whether they would deal with Cui Buqu and Rong Qing. If he wanted them buried here, he had to do it himself.

Behind Yang Yun was Wu Yi on his own horse. Li Yan had not appeared—he was fearful and weighed down by worries—but Wu Yi had more courage. From the moment he’d thrown in his lot with Yang Yun, he had known he’d boarded a ship he could never step off. And after Huang Lüe’s death, he’d become even more certain that if he wished to survive this, he had to pray for smooth sailing for Yang Yun.

“Governor, why not shoot some flaming arrows in first?” Wu Yi suggested.

Yang Yun gave a slight nod.

Wu Yi waved his men over and was about to give the order when the door of the relay station creaked open. Through the gap, they could see that the interior was bright with lamplight. The man they were all looking for, Cui Buqu, was sitting at a small table in the courtyard. A tea set was laid out before him, the cups filled and steaming.

Cui Buqu raised his teacup and greeted Yang Yun from his seat. “The rain has stopped, and the flood should recede in a few days. Is Governor Yang interested in sharing some tea with me in celebration of the heavens finally smiling upon us?”

“Your lordship, don’t fall into their trap,” Wu Yi whispered hurriedly. “He’s trying to provoke you!”

Of course Yang Yun had no intention of accepting his invitation. He sneered. “Cui Buqu, chief of the Zuoyue Bureau—your reputation precedes you. It’s a pity that you’ll die here tonight. If you’re trying to convince me I’m walking into an ambush, it’s no use.”

He had no intention of listening to Cui Buqu’s prattle. He raised a hand, and the archers flanking him climbed atop the walls. Instantly, dozens of arrows were aimed at Cui Buqu. When Yang Yun’s hand came down, the arrows would fly, and Cui Buqu would be no more.

The doors surrounding the courtyard were tightly closed. Rong Qing, Pei Jingzhe, and the rest sat inside looking at each other. Cui Buqu had forbidden them to come out into the courtyard.

In a situation like this, it made no difference how many of them confronted the enemy, unless they were all martial artists on par with Feng Xiao. That man could go anywhere he pleased, ignoring a rain of arrows or forest of spears. But there was only one Feng Xiao.

Listening to the voices outside, Rong Qing's heart leapt into his throat. If he were Cui Buqu, what would he do to escape such a dangerous situation? He thought and thought, but came up completely empty. Cui Buqu had enough time to say one or two sentences at most. If he used them to appeal to the archers' consciences and try to convince them to switch sides, he would die before he finished speaking.

But what else could he do? Was there another way?

Pei Jingzhe was also thinking hard. Could Cui Buqu be waiting for Feng Xiao and Guan Shanhai to return and launch a surprise attack? But that was impossible. Even if Feng Xiao rushed over this instant, he couldn't arrive in time to snatch Cui Buqu out from under the arrows bristling from the tops of walls.

What card was Cui Buqu holding that he'd throw away any chance of resistance or escape and instruct them to stay where they were? Surely he didn't believe he could save them by sacrificing himself. If Yang Yun dared to kill the Zuoyue Bureau chief, the rest of them went without saying.

Pei Jingzhe's eyes were closed, his forehead beaded with sweat. His palms were clammy, his face so twisted with nerves it hardly seemed human. He opened his eyes and looked at Qiao Xian and Rong Qing.

Their faces were ashen. Qiao Xian's jaw was clenched, her body tense as if she might charge outside at any moment. But because Cui Buqu had ordered her to stay put—and Pei Jingzhe had struck her acupoint for good measure—she remained silent.

The three of them looked more wretched than Cui Buqu sitting outside, but none of them were in the mood to laugh at themselves. They stared at the closed window with such intensity their eyes were practically burning a hole in the paper.

This was the critical moment—Cui Buqu had one shot.

Chapter 145

CUI BUQU WAS BESIEGED on all sides. He sat calmly under the stares of the army, the steel arrows glinting bright above him, in the moment between life and death. He only had time to say two sentences. So that was what he did.

The first was: “Have you visited the commandery prison lately?”

Followed by: “When you set out, did you leave enough men to guard your study?”

The first sentence made Yang Yun frown. At the second, his eyes went wide in shock. His raised hand remained frozen in the air.

“Governor!” Wu Yi urged him from behind.

“What did you do?” Yang Yun knew he should bring his hand down regardless and have Cui Buqu turned into a pincushion, but for some reason, he hesitated.

“Governor!” Wu Yi was so anxious he yearned to grab Yang Yun’s hand and yank it down himself.

“Cui Buqu!” Yang Yun roared.

Cui Buqu smiled. “Scared, Governor Yang?”

The truly ambitious felt no fear. Power was their ultimate pursuit, even if it meant putting their own lives on the line. Liu Bang, the founder of the Han dynasty, was the greatest exemplar. When his political opponent Xiang Yu had kidnapped Liu Bang’s father, wife, and children and threatened to boil them alive, Liu Bang had calmly responded by asking Xiang Yu to leave him a sip of the soup.

Cui Buqu had initially thought Yang Yun such a person. He had no children of his own and a discordant relationship with his wife, all in order to minimize his weaknesses and avoid being manipulated and threatened. But upon meeting him face-to-face, Cui Buqu knew at once that he’d overestimated him. The man might not care about continuing his family line, but he cared about himself very much.

Yang Yun was over thirty years old, with a short mustache and a neatly trimmed beard. Even on such a stormy night, his hair and clothes were meticulously groomed—as if he couldn't stand untidiness. His position among his men was also telling. Guards flanked him, but no one stood behind him. If he encountered any danger, he could quickly retreat into the circle of his guards to ensure his safety. Here was a person who both valued his appearance and cherished his life. He loved himself most of all, so a wife and children didn't matter. As long as he was well, that was enough.

"Governor Yang, I presume you only wanted to skim off some grain and sell it for a little profit. You never meant to go this far, did you?" Cui Buqu said.

The instant Yang Yun failed to bring his hand down, Cui Buqu knew he'd found his weakness. Now he could turn the tide.

"If you'd only misappropriated a little rice, you could repent to His Majesty. The worst you would suffer is a dismissal and a whipping. But a revolt is different. You were using the Thirteen Floors of Yunhai, but you didn't know they were also using you. They've led you step by step into a trap, allowing the situation to escalate until you were pushed to the edge of the cliff. Now you have no choice but to do what they want."

"Kill him!" Wu Yi roared, "Kill this invalid! He's making up lies! What's so frightening about that!"

He charged forward with the blade in hand, raising it high and slashing toward Cui Buqu.

"Pei Jingzhe!" Cui Buqu shouted.

Almost before he said it, Pei Jingzhe was rushing out of the house. Wu Yi was far slower than an arrow and was quickly knocked to the ground. Pei Jingzhe pinned him down and set a blade to his neck.

The archers on the wall should have shot Cui Buqu the moment Wu Yi charged. Yet instead, they were craning their necks to look behind them, their faces filled with surprise. Their formation quickly fell apart.

In the darkness whence they'd come, pinpoints of light shone, though no one had seen them appear. They grew bigger and bigger, brighter and

brighter, transforming from scattered sparks into clusters of flame. Shouts accompanied the lights, rolling toward them like rumbling thunder.

The source of the commotion was a little distance away, growing no closer to the relay station, yet Yang Yun's face went ashen. He knew where that howling, surging tide was heading.

The commandery governor's residence.

"For two years now, you used the tax-exemption donation policy to lie to the court. You conspired with wealthy households to share the spoils and made a handsome profit. Had you been willing to stop there, you wouldn't have found yourself in this disastrous situation. But the human heart is never content, is it? And this year, something unexpected happened: The rain was far heavier than anticipated. The court sent relief grain, but you were greedy and kept every sack. Tens of thousands were displaced; in their desperation, they flocked to the city and almost caused a riot. At the same time, the court sent a censor to oversee relief efforts. Terrified that the longer you waited, the more likely it was that you'd be exposed, you decided to finish what you'd started and killed the refugees. But there were too many for you to murder them all—you shut the remainder inside the prison. You planned to wait until after the censor left to finish the job, so you could pretend those civilians tragically drowned in the floods. With them dead, you wouldn't need to cough up the grain either, thus killing two birds with one stone. All would be well."

Cui Buqu spoke rapidly, laying out Yang Yun's plans as if he'd witnessed each step himself. Yet more horrifying than Cui Buqu's analysis was the reckless gambit he'd chosen: Along with the refugees, he'd also released the prisoners on death row who'd been mixed with them, leading them all to attack the commandery governor's residence.

Yang Yun had brought men here to kill Cui Buqu, yet now his own home was being destroyed. All those desperate prisoners and refugees needed was for someone to open the prison doors and shout a suggestion—perhaps that the residence had food, and that an imperial envoy would protect them if anything happened. They must have rushed to the residence in a frenzy to ransack the place. Cui Buqu's men would surely be among them, and in the study they'd find…

The clamor rose around them, louder and louder.

Citizens in their homes who'd been too afraid to come out now couldn't resist cracking open their windows and peeking outside.

Howls split the air. Yang Yun heard the sound of swords and spears clanging. The mob must have taken the prison guards' weapons. Yang Yun had brought almost every guard and soldier with him, leaving only a few men to watch over the commandery governor's manor. He hadn't anticipated Cui Buqu would be ruthless enough to use this indirect approach to solve his predicament, hoping to draw Yang Yun's army away from the relay station.

If the governor's residence was destroyed, all the secrets he had hidden there would be destroyed with it.

Yang Yun's bloodshot eyes bulged. He glared viciously at Cui Buqu, as if staring down an enemy he'd sworn revenge on for killing his father. "Do you know what will happen now that those refugees are released? All of Guangqian County will suffer thanks to this. Cui Buqu, do you intend to become the villain who brought calamity to Guangqian for your own selfish gain?!"

Such absurd words, twisting truth into lies, yet Yang Yun shouted them with self-righteous conviction. The panic-stricken soldiers were whispering among themselves. None of them had any attention to spare for Yang Yun's pompous blustering.

The scene in the distance grew more chaotic. Flames licked into the sky from the governor's residence, accompanied by thick, billowing smoke. Yang Yun had to do something. Even if Cui Buqu held all of Yang Yun's secrets in his hands, if the man was dead, he would never have a chance to tell them.

"Archers! Release the—"

Before he could say *arrows*, his voice died like a throttled rooster, wide-eyed and instantly mute. A blade was pressed firmly against his neck.

Screams rose from all around. Everyone stumbled back from Yang Yun and his assailant, a man was wearing the armor of the commandery guard. He raised his head slightly, revealing the face under his helmet.

Guan Shanhai.

While the riots in the city had distracted the soldiers, Guan Shanhai had taken the opportunity to sneak through their ranks. Everyone’s eyes were on the refugees occupying the governor’s residence, and thus no one had noticed as he quietly approached Yang Yun and got close enough to threaten him.

As agony spread through Yang Yun’s neck, he realized his assailant truly meant to kill him. Desperate to save himself, he shouted, “Stop!”

That single cry revealed his thoughts. Now Cui Buqu was even more certain he’d made the right move. Yang Yun was confident as long as his enemies feared death—only when they didn’t fear it did he become afraid.

Cui Buqu looked around. “Put down your weapons and surrender,” he said coldly. “The culprit will be held accountable, but those who merely followed orders will go unpunished.”

The surrounding soldiers were rattled by the commotion in the city and had begun to panic as well. Other than Yang Yun’s few confidants, the rest of his men had no unwavering loyalty to him. As for his personal guards, now that he’d been captured, they didn’t dare make any rash moves.

Qiao Xian stood in the doorway. She’d been a step too late to catch Wu Yi—after all, Cui Buqu had called Pei Jingzhe’s name, not hers.

She saw Guan Shanhai, who’d supposedly been sent to Zhao’s Teahouse in search of evidence, yet had instead masqueraded as an ordinary soldier from the governor’s residence.

While she’d been mired in indecision, while others thought Cui Buqu completely helpless, he had already laid out the entire game of chess and predetermined the results.

Even Rong Qing finally came in handy.

He stepped forward, full of righteous fervor, and strenuously denounced Yang Yun, then promised not to prosecute anyone else present. At his impassioned speech, the archers finally lowered their bows, and rank after rank of the surrounding soldiers followed suit, throwing down their weapons. At last, only Yang Yun’s personal guards were left. No power remained to him.

Qiao Xian had thought she had a thorough understanding of Cui Buqu's abilities. But at that moment, she realized even she had underestimated him.

Lately, Cui Buqu had cooperated frequently with Feng Xiao. The sight of Deputy Chief Feng beside him, flashy and ostentatious, gave many the illusion that the success of their collaboration relied more on Feng-er's martial arts than Cui Buqu's intelligence. After all, no one could turn a blind eye to Feng Xiao's dazzling appearance. Even the members of the Thirteen Floors of Yunhai had focused more of their efforts on Feng Xiao. But all of them were wrong. Although Cui Buqu didn't know martial arts, his frail body was also his shield.

By the time Yang Yun realized he'd underestimated his enemy, it was too late.

As if sensing Qiao Xian's eyes on him, Cui Buqu turned and met her gaze.

"When…when did your lordship send people to the county prison?" Qiao Xian asked her next question with great difficulty: "Why didn't you tell us?"

"In illusion lies truth; in truth lies illusion." Cui Buqu's expression was inscrutable.

No one had noticed the disappearance of the two Zuoyue guards who had accompanied them. Their martial arts were mediocre, and they couldn't be of much help; at most, they could run errands. It hadn't been surprising that they were scarce for several days. Even Qiao Xian hadn't thought much of their departure. But when Yang Yun charged over in readiness to kill, those two guards had been enough to launch a sneak attack on the county prison and release the refugees and prisoners.

Qiao Xian should have been first to hear of this plan, yet she'd been kept in the dark, reduced to the same level as Rong Qing.

Her breath hitched at the thought, and her eyes met Cui Buqu's clear and frigid gaze. She suddenly felt cold all over. "Lord Chief…" *You knew everything?*

Cui Buqu didn't answer her unspoken question. He didn't even give her a second glance. Instead he turned, his cloak billowing skyward, and

resolutely brought his hand down, completing the gesture Yang Yun had failed to perform.

“By authority of the emperor, seize Yang Yun’s guards!”

As effortless as blowing away dust.

Yang Yun’s face was ashen. He swayed on his feet, watching his personal guards scream and fall to the ground as they were stabbed in the chest. Defeat was as contagious as any disease. Their morale shattered instantly, not least because the man they were loyal to was still in the hands of the enemy.

Considering the matter mostly settled, Pei Jingzhe bound Wu Yi’s arms behind his back and went to help Guan Shanhai deal with Yang Yun. When he saw Cui Buqu had mounted Yang Yun’s horse, he grabbed a horse of his own to follow him and ordered everyone to accompany them to the governor’s residence to clean up the aftermath.

“We’re going to the governor’s residence. Do you want to come?” He trotted up to Qiao Xian, bending down and extending a hand to her.

Qiao Xian was startled. “The lord chief didn’t say I could go.”

“You’re from the Zuoyue Bureau,” said Pei Jingzhe, confused. “If I can go, of course you can too.”

Qiao Xian hesitated for a moment. She didn’t take Pei Jingzhe’s hand. Instead she leapt lightly onto the horse behind him and gathered up the reins. “Hyah!”

Pei Jingzhe was stunned. He suddenly felt that his and Qiao Xian’s roles were reversed, and that he looked more like the beautiful woman being protected in her sturdy arms.

Qiao Xian didn’t notice his awkwardness and only saw him looking around. She frowned. “What are you looking at? Stop fidgeting so much.”

“Strange. Where is my lord?” Pei Jingzhe couldn’t locate the deputy chief’s familiar figure in the crowd. No matter how perilous Fengyun Tavern was, Feng Xiao had been gone for most of the day. Surely he should have been back by now.

To think that from start to finish, Feng Xiao had played no role in this incident.

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When Feng Xiao had walked into Fengyun Tavern some hours earlier, the sky was a bruised mixture of purple and blue, the golden glow of sunset clinging to the horizon.

The tavern had only one floor, and the smell of wine wafted out into the street. A handful of people, perhaps ten in total, sat scattered across three or four tables, chatting in low voices.

No one looked up at Feng Xiao's arrival. They kept talking among themselves, paying him no mind, as if he didn't exist at all. Feng Xiao was instantly displeased. He was a grand, dignified, elegant, dashing, peerless young man. If he was second best, no one could claim to be first. He'd never been ignored like this.

He settled himself down cross-legged and slapped a hand on the table. "Where's the owner? The waiters? Are you all dead? Serve the wine!"

Perhaps his attitude was too abrasive because the other guests finally looked over at him.

Feng Xiao smiled gleefully. Others were afraid of the limelight, but he reveled in it. Not only was he not annoyed at being scrutinized by strangers, he even flashed them a toothy grin.

The waiter rushed over with a jar of wine. "How can I help you, sir?"

"Lanling wine!"

The waiter looked troubled. "My apologies, sir, but we have no Lanling wine here. Lanling is too far away."

"Then what kind of wine do you have? Just bring up some good wine. I have plenty of money, if nothing else."

The waiter raised the jar he was holding. "The best-selling wine here is Amber Light. Would your lordship care to try it?"

Feng Xiao smiled. "I don't want to drink Amber Light, I want to drink Lanling wine. If there's no Lanling wine, give me some penalty

wine.”[5]

The waiter looked baffled. This wasn’t the first time he’d encountered a customer trying to pick a fight, but it was certainly the first time he’d encountered a customer who said he wanted to drink penalty wine.

“You’re not going to say you don’t even have penalty wine, are you?” Feng Xiao asked.

The corner of the waiter’s mouth twitched. “I’m sorry, sir, but we really don’t have such a thing.”

Feng Xiao’s expression modulated from joy to anger in the blink of an eye. He threw up his hands, overturning the table, and the porcelain plates, cups, and bowls all clattered as they fell to the floor. “What kind of rotten tavern are you running where you don’t have anything worth serving?!”

He grabbed for the waiter’s throat, but the waiter showed no sign of panic. The man hurled the jar of wine at Feng Xiao and twisted to avoid the attack.

At the same time, the seated guests all rose in unison. Some barehanded and some wielding weapons, they leapt toward Feng Xiao.

Feng Xiao laughed loudly and shot into the air. Quick as lightning, he avoided their attacks and caught the waiter. Then he slowed, transitioning from an arrow to a feather as he landed lightly in the rafters overlooking everyone below. “You laid such an inescapable trap, yet Xiao Lü is still too scared to show his face?” he jeered.

“To deal with you, the eleven first-tier martial artists here are plenty,” a familiar voice called out. “There’s no need for the pavilion leader to appear himself.” Yuan Sansi strolled out of the rear hall and stood with his hands behind his back.

Feng Xiao was so high up that Yuan Sansi had to bend his neck back to speak to him. Apparently dissatisfied with the lack of intimidation factor, he followed Feng Xiao’s lead and jumped up into the rafters as well.

“A familiar face!” Feng Xiao called. “Lao-Yuan! It’s been many days since we parted, and you’ve grown thin. Could Xiao Lü have been so upset

with your failure at Mount Tiannan that he refused to feed you?”

Hearing Feng Xiao gaily rubbing salt in his wounds, Yuan Sansi exploded with fury. At Mount Tiannan, Fan Yun’s betrayal and the actions of the Zuoyue and Jiejian Bureaus had severely weakened the Thirteen Floors of Yunhai. The position of commandery governor Yuan Sansi had painstakingly worked toward for many years had also been ripped from him, and he was left with no choice but to adopt a new identity and retreat into the shadows. And after spending so many years basking in the light, how could he possibly be pacified with some expensive clothes and delicacies?

He snorted coldly. “Feng Xiao, can you believe Cui Buqu knew this was a trap, yet still asked you to come?”

“I believe it.” Feng Xiao’s smile was radiant. “I believe in your mother’s ass!”

Before he’d finished speaking, he was rushing toward Yuan Sansi.

The eleven masters watched hungrily from the tavern floor. They were waiting for any sign of weakness from Feng Xiao, ready to seize their chance to dart in and kill him in a single blow.

Chapter 146

YUAN SANSI recalled something a senior from his sect had once told him. When five martial arts masters had besieged Huanyue Sect Leader Yan Wushi, it hadn't mattered how formidable he was. Under their combined assault, he had nearly lost his life.

At present, Feng Xiao faced not just the formidable enemy Yuan Sansi, but eleven other first-tier martial artists. Even the most skilled grandmaster in the world would find themselves as helpless as Yan Wushi in this situation.

The pavilion leader had given orders that Cui Buqu was to be spared, but Feng Xiao should be killed. There was no need to hold back.

Feng Xiao must die.

The eleven experts moved in sync with Yuan Sansi. No matter what, Feng Xiao would meet his end today. There was no chance he'd walk out of this tavern.

Although the tavern door was open, no one with eyes would dare enter upon seeing the commotion within. As it was, people in the city could barely feed themselves after the recent downpour and flooding; no one was in the mood to come in for a drink.

Yet as the battle unfolded in the rafters, someone did walk through the door. He wore black robes and a black cloak, and his pace and demeanor were leisurely as he fanned himself and looked around.

The eleven experts all turned to stare. But not only did they fail to teach this uninvited guest who'd foolishly overestimated himself a lesson, their expressions went strange, as if they'd seen a ghost.

The sky wasn't yet fully dark, though night was closing in. It was the time when monsters, ghosts, and demons came out to roam.

The uninvited guest acted as if nothing was amiss, not even glancing up at the rafters. He chose a seat and sat down, tapping the table with his fan. "Such a fine tavern, yet no one's selling any wine?"

His appearance and voice were identical to Feng Xiao's.

Could it be that the first Feng Xiao was an imposter, and the Feng Xiao who'd just come in was the real one?

It wasn't just the eleven experts who were staring. Yuan Sansi also caught sight of the newcomer. One person might wonder if his eyes were playing tricks on him, but if all twelve of them saw it, it must be so: There really were two identical Feng Xiaos.

In a duel between experts, nothing was more important than maintaining focus. Yuan Sansi spared only a quick glance at the new Feng Xiao, but this was enough—faster than the blink of an eye, someone slipped through the gaps between his palm attacks, and zither strings shot soundlessly toward his face.

Yuan Sansi moved to block without a second thought, but his foe attacked from the other side too. Pain throbbed through his shoulder, and he groaned and stumbled, falling from the rafters. Before his feet touched the ground, he slung himself around a pillar and swept toward Feng Xiao once more.

At the same time, the eleven masters all rushed toward the other Feng Xiao, who stood as solidly as a mountain.

The second Feng Xiao laughed loudly. He didn't wait to meet them head-on, but flitted behind the wine jar cabinets. Amid the palm blasts and flashing blades, the wine jars fell and shattered, their contents sloshing onto the floor. The wine's rich fragrance poured into the martial experts' lungs with every inhale, filling them with a rush of intoxication.

Many of these martial experts possessed a keen sense of smell. The two Feng Xiaos shared an identical stature and voice, but there were subtle differences in their scents. Thanks to the wine jars shattering, the aroma of wine clung to everyone, making them wholly indistinguishable.

A new silhouette appeared in the doorway—another Feng Xiao.

This time, no one was shocked. The third Feng Xiao laughed brightly. "What a coincidence, Lao-Yuan. Have you been well?"

Yuan Sansi didn't deign to respond. He and the Feng Xiao fighting in the rafters separated and landed, one on either side of the roof.

Three Feng Xiaos. One in the rafters, one standing on the wine jar fragments, and one in the doorway. The three were indistinguishable.

Who could be certain there wouldn’t be a fourth?

Yuan Sansi gave a sneering laugh. “Petty tricks! Feng Xiao, you always saw yourself as better than everyone else. Yet you resort to such methods to keep yourself alive?”

Of course three Feng Xiaos couldn’t really exist; it had to be a disguise. Even if no one could distinguish between them from their appearances alone, the three Feng Xiaos couldn’t possibly all wield the same signature weapon.

“Lao-Yuan,” said the Feng Xiao at the door. “You brought eleven people to ambush me, but you won’t allow me to use any helpers? What’s that they say—state officials are allowed to set fires, but the common folk aren’t allowed to light a lamp?”

The Feng Xiao in the rafters sighed. “Now look how you’ve embarrassed him. The Thirteen Floors of Yunhai have already used up all their tricks!”

The Feng Xiao standing beside the wine cabinet laughed arrogantly. “Xiao Lü doesn’t have the courage to face us himself. He’s pushed you out as a pawn instead. Lao-Yuan, as one of the most vital members of the organization, don’t you feel frustrated?”

Yuan Sansi turned a deaf ear. He swooped down from the rafters like a diving falcon, wind and lightning behind him. One palm became ten, ten became a thousand, until hundreds of thousands of afterimages howled toward Feng Xiao from all directions.

Night had fallen, and the tavern lanterns swayed as the wind gusted in. The candle flames wavered, casting their flickering light over the chaotic interior. The eleven masters melted into shadows as they swept toward the two Feng Xiaos on the ground. Each held unique weapons and had differing proficiencies in qinggong, the swiftest quickly taking the lead.

The ones who were half a step behind would forever be grateful for the inferiority of their skills. It saved their lives.

The Feng Xiao beside the cabinet leapt into the air, his palm strikes surging with a force that could topple mountains as he confronted the three rushing toward him.

The Feng Xiao at the door smoothly unshouldered the zither on his back. Bolstered by his qi, the instrument soared into the air and spun rapidly until a slender yet powerful hand steadied it. Fingers plucked the strings, and music poured out. Though the notes were monotonous, the energy-infused sound waves had already reached their target—the three frontmost martial experts felt blood trickle from their ears as their heads began to ring, filled only with this single sound.

Like a blizzard of snowflakes or a ferocious downpour, the noise reached its crescendo before abruptly cutting off, leaving silence behind. Blood poured from their noses and mouths as the world spun around them, their movements becoming sluggish.

The zither-wielding Feng Xiao snorted coldly, but to them, that small sound was like the ringing of a great bronze bell, striking them squarely in

the chest. Their bodies went rigid as Feng Xiao struck them with the zither, the force behind their blades instantly falling away. Twice he swung the zither, then three times. None were spared as they screamed and went flying.

Up in the rafters, Yuan Sansi was still embroiled in combat with the first Feng Xiao when he noticed the situation on the ground. His lip curled.

When Feng Xiao had pretended to join the Thirteen Floors of Yunhai, he had relayed his background to the other directors. Yuan Sansi knew he was the leader of the Fajing Sect, and that this sect was unique among the three demonic sects for using zithers as weapons. The Feng Xiao on the ground was wielding the zither masterfully, so there was no doubt he was the real one. The man in front of him was an obvious fake.

Two cold rays of light flew from Yuan Sansi's sleeves, one arcing toward his foe's neck and the other sweeping in from behind toward his foe's dantian in his lower abdomen. Feng Xiao dropped down, but Yuan Sansi had anticipated this move too. A sneer hung on his lips as he raised a hand and shot a third ray of light. The wind from his palm followed, whistling down toward the top of Feng Xiao's head.

Feng Xiao was mid-fall; he shouldn't be able to call upon his internal energy now. Even if he managed to withstand Yuan Sansi's assault, he'd have no chance to counterattack. Once that palm hit, it would either shatter his skull or leave him gravely injured, throwing his blood and qi into chaos.

Someone screamed nearby.

Feng Xiao's dark cloak flared as he soared upward like a black-feathered phoenix, only to swoop back down toward the ground. It was a sight as arrogant as it was dazzling, unmatched in glory. The string in his hand was as sharp as any blade, capable of cleaving stone and steel. Two heads rolled to the floor.

Feng Xiao remained unyielding, his speed and momentum unstoppable as he lunged forward. The tavern was like the swirling maelstrom at the beginning of time. Wherever his black robes swept, a crimson trail followed in his wake. He sliced through the primordial chaos, and thousands of ghosts howled in the desolate night.

The metallic stink of blood had come to overshadow the fragrance of wine. Feng Xiao was merciless in his attack. The eleven first-tier experts became nothing but novices before his onslaught, unable to keep up or fight back. The three Feng Xiaos seemed to overlap before separating again, as if he had truly split himself into three.

Could there really be three Feng Xiaos? one of the eleven thought in a daze.

The man's surname was Zhu, given name Yeqing. He hailed from the Songshan Sect and wielded a sword. The Songshan Sect wasn't a large one, but Zhu Yeqing was exceptionally talented. At the age of twenty-five, he'd singlehandedly defeated the Three Heroes of the Gobi, a triumph that elevated him to fame. Liuli Palace of Fangzhang Isle ranked him thirty-seventh on their list. Everyone aspired to be the strongest in the world, and he'd made it into the top fifty. He was no ordinary expert.

Tonight he'd planned to use Feng Xiao's death to propel his reputation to even greater heights—but he'd never anticipated his enemy would be so powerful.

Zhu Yeqing had studied martial arts diligently since childhood with the goal of becoming renowned throughout the land. Now, he knew he'd never achieve this dream in this lifetime. Ghostly shadows danced, and the lamplight dazzled. When the last glimmer disappeared, like a candle snuffed in the wind, Zhu Yeqing's vision went dark forever.

Around him, the fight went on.

The remaining masters knew tonight's battle was a fight to the death. There was no room for compromise or mercy. Feng Xiao had to die—if he didn't, every one of them would die in his stead.

Yuan Sansi's palm met one of the Feng Xiaos; qi surged wildly between them. Both men were repelled to opposite sides of the tavern, where they landed firmly on their feet. Yuan Sansi was flagging. His qi and blood were boiling, but he forced himself to swallow the coppery blood down. He didn't know if Feng Xiao was in a similar state, but he didn't dare take the gamble.

His certainty in his own victory was gone. Yuan Sansi knew too well that doubt would cause him to falter. He suddenly remembered something

the pavilion leader had said to him before he left. Feng Xiao had used the two sarira, and his martial arts had greatly improved. He was now a formidable nemesis of the Thirteen Floors of Yunhai who must be eliminated at all costs.

Although Yuan Sansi knew Feng Xiao was an excellent martial artist, at the time, he'd refused to see that the pavilion leader's words had been a warning to Yuan Sansi himself. Now he had to admit that the pavilion leader was right. Feng Xiao's lightning-fast progress and prodigious talent were truly unmatched. What was more, he wielded the authority of the Jiejian Bureau and shared a peculiar relationship with Cui Buqu. Two men—one outstanding in martial arts and the other in wisdom—learning from each other's strengths to bridge their weaknesses.

How could the Thirteen Floors leave such a powerful enemy alive?

All at once, the tavern went quiet. Even the strong wind outside seemed to have been strangled, unable to make a sound.

Including Yuan Sansi, six experts remained. As for Feng Xiao, there were still three of him. He'd killed half of Yuan Sansi's men.

Yuan Sansi's doubts continued to grow. The ability to split oneself into multiple copies was the stuff of myth and legend. It was impossible for Feng Xiao to really create two more of himself—but there were also very few people at his level of martial arts. Of them, who would rush over to willingly play his doppelganger?

There had to be differences in the martial arts of their three opponents, and they were certain to have unique weaknesses too. As long as Yuan Sansi could identify the copies and leave them to the other experts while he focused on the real Feng Xiao, his chances of victory would be greatly increased.

Yuan Sansi centered himself, closed his eyes, and listened for the enemy's movements in the darkness. The tavern was silent. It was as if even their breathing had stopped.

Blood clung to the silk zither string, flowing along until it condensed into a fat drop. Finally, the silk could no longer bear their weight; the drop plinked to the ground.

One of the Feng Xiaos made the slightest movement—an unconscious action. This person was the weakest martial artist of the three.

Yuan Sansi whistled, and two of the experts leapt forward to attack the Feng Xiao who'd moved. One of the remaining two Feng Xiaos couldn't resist darting over to save his companion. That person was also a copy!

Three more experts struck.

Yuan Sansi didn't hesitate. He gathered all the cold light in his hands and transformed it into a long sword, lunging toward the last Feng Xiao.

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The riot at the governor's residence was quickly quelled.

The victims and death row prisoners had been locked away for a long time; they were greatly weakened. Under the leadership of the Zuoyue guards, they'd relied on the strength of their own outrage and the lack of sentries to capture the residence. The instant Cui Buqu arrived with soldiers, the situation was swiftly contained.

Pei Jingzhe, arriving shortly after, breathed a sigh of relief when he saw Cui Buqu had avoided harming any of the refugees.

Perhaps his relief was too obvious, because Cui Buqu's mouth curved faintly. "Were you worried I'd use the refugees to free us from our predicament, then order them killed to tie up loose ends?"

Pei Jingzhe went red. "It was a foolish thought."

"I may not be a good person, but I've no interest in attacking unarmed civilians. If not for the flood and Yang Yun's corruption, they'd just be ordinary people. They'll be our best witnesses against Yang Yun, Wu Yi, and the others. Go gather everyone up and take a tally. Keep them in one place; don't let them run around and cause trouble. Then search the governor's residence. Yang Yun has hidden a portion of the grain here somewhere. When you find it, make some congee for these people. Let them eat first."

Pei Jingzhe snapped to attention and hurried away at once, completely forgetting that Cui Buqu was the chief of the Zuoyue Bureau and technically had no power to give him orders.

Rong Qing piped up. “Cui-xiansheng, how can I help?”

“The death row prisoners are still mixed in with the victims of the flood. Find the register and figure out who the real criminals are, and who were unjustly imprisoned by Yang Yun. It’ll be hard work.”

But this kind of work was Rong Qing’s specialty. He eagerly got started.

The governor’s residence was in shambles thanks to the refugees, and many had taken advantage of the chaos to plunder Yang Yun’s more valuable treasures. Cui Buqu, however, had ordered the two Zuoyue guards to focus their search on Yang Yun’s study. Now they reported that they’d indeed found something strange there.

Yang Yun was hauled over, his hands tied behind his back. Cui Buqu led him into the study, where the floor tiles under the desk had been removed, revealing a dark hole.

Important dignitaries often had separate entrances to their rooms. Even then, if they had unsavory secrets to keep, they also needed places like this to hide the evidence. Yang Yun was unsurprised to see the secret chamber opened. He’d been pale and silent this entire time, but now he spoke: “Cui Buqu, I can’t stop you from going in—but I beg of you, please go alone. This matter concerns the reputation of the royal family. Unrelated persons must not know!”

“Did you not think of the royal family’s reputation when you did these things?” Cui Buqu asked curiously. “Or did you remember that your surname is Yang only now?”

“I guarantee there are no traps inside,” cried Yang Yun hoarsely. “But there are some things only you should see!”

“The Zuoyue Bureau is bound by duty. There is nothing we cannot know,” said Cui Buqu coldly.

The two of them were standing very close in the lamplight. The longer Cui Buqu gazed at him, the more he felt that Yang Yun resembled

someone he’d seen before.

Cui Buqu didn’t comment on it. He asked the two Zuoyue guards to send Yang Yun in first to light the lamp, then followed, descending step by step down the stone staircase into the secret chamber.

The candle flamed to life, and Cui Buqu and the two Zuoyue guards looked around, stunned.

Chapter 147

THE TWO ZUOYUE guards had anticipated a room filled with gold and silver. Instead, numerous paintings adorned the walls of the small chamber, and several rolled-up scrolls lay scattered across the floor and table.

But Cui Buqu was stunned for another reason: He recognized the subject of the paintings.

Standing with her head turned coyly over her shoulder, the upper half of her body bare. Half-sprawled on the bed, holding her chest and partially exposed. Draped in fluttering gauzy fabric, the flesh underneath just barely discernable.

These weren't like Li Yan's vulgar and explicit paintings. The woman gazed from the paintings with half-lidded eyes or looked out over a fan, smiling warmly. From the tender beauty of a young girl to the elegance of a married woman, the paintings showed the same subject across the years in various styles. The painter had truly captured her charm, each frown and smile vividly portrayed.

Cui Buqu didn't need to wait for Yang Yun to confirm. He already knew the subject's identity.

"I didn't realize you shared such a past with Princess Leping." Cui Buqu glanced at Yang Yun, a shadow of a smile tugging at his lips. "Although—I did think of the princess's kept man when I saw you."

Yang Yun sat upright with his eyes closed, feigning the inability to hear or speak. He was powerless to stop this, so his only option was to maintain his silence.

The two Zuoyue guards exchanged uneasy glances, a chill creeping up their spines. The secrets of the royal palace were not something they should be privy to. Yet Cui Buqu didn't allow them to leave. He pointed at the bricks behind them. "Crack open that wall with your blades."

A spasm crossed Yang Yun's face. He opened his eyes and finally stopped pretending to be mute. "How did you know?"

The two Zuoyue guards obeyed. Their sharp blades scraped the wall, sending white powder fluttering down and quickly revealing a golden gleam beneath.

“Lord Chief.”

“Continue.”

Blades scraped along the crack again, widening it in all directions. In moments, they had unearthed a surprising discovery.

Behind the thin layer of flour paste lay a solid wall of shimmering gold bricks, stacked from floor to ceiling. It was only a single wall, but it was astonishing to behold.

“There’s a strange crevice in the corner here!” one of the Zuoyue guards exclaimed.

He pressed his fingers into the crevice and slowly pried it open. Bit by bit, the wall parted to reveal a hidden passage leading to a brightly illuminated hall. Flickering candlelight hinted at an exit at the far end.

Cui Buqu gasped in astonishment. “Commandery Governor Yang, your secret chambers are far more impressive than those of the former mogul of the northwest, Duan Qihu. Someone ought to have brought that country bumpkin here to witness the splendor of the imperial family!”

“How dare you slander the Yang family!” shouted Yang Yun in anger. “You’re just a dog my aunt raised—ah!”

A Zuoyue guard had kicked him to the ground and begun to beat him mercilessly. Within just a few blows, his nose was bruised and his face was swollen. Cui Buqu pretended not to notice, choosing instead to admire the golden wall. He gazed at it intently, as if flowers might bloom from its gilded surface. As Yang Yun’s shouts devolved into pitiful wails, he turned back in feigned surprise.

“Commandery Governor Yang, despite your embezzlement of the court’s grain, your disregard for human life, and your desecration of the princess, our nation has laws to address such crimes. You can continue to punish yourself like this, but the Ministry of Justice will not plead for mercy on your behalf before His Majesty.”

Yang Yun no longer tried to speak.

“Lord Chief, the passage leads aboveground to a courtyard with a woman and two mute servants inside!”

The Zuoyue guard who had gone to investigate quickly returned with the woman in tow. She was dressed in lavish robes and appeared about twenty years old. Her figure was graceful and her face like a painting, though her panicked expression somewhat dulled her beauty.

As soon as Cui Buqu laid eyes on her, a smile spread across his face. “Commandery Governor Yang, it seems that being stationed so far from the eyes of the emperor has enabled you to become as carefree as any immortal!”

The woman bore an unmistakable likeness to the young Princess Leping.

“Now can you make them leave?” Yang Yun asked hoarsely.

Cui Buqu waved his hand, and the Zuoyue guards escorted the woman out of the chamber. Her expression was a mix of confusion and helplessness, and she glanced repeatedly over at Yang Yun, who didn’t spare her a single glance.

“Speak.” Cui Buqu adjusted the collar of his cloak and settled into a cross-legged seat on the floor.

With his hands and legs tightly bound, Yang Yun didn’t have a similar luxury. He could barely sit or stand, and was forced to lean uncomfortably against the wall. “What do you want me to say?” he said icily, “You’ve seen everything; what more is there?”

“I have no interest in whether your fascination with Princess Leping is one-sided or mutual. As for the embezzlement, that matter will be dealt with by the Ministry of Justice and the Imperial Censorate. What I truly wish to understand is your connection to the Thirteen Floors of Yunhai.”

“If I tell you, what will you give me in return?” Yang Yun asked, attempting to bargain.

The corner of Cui Buqu’s mouth quirked up. “I’ll burn all the paintings here and let that woman go. What happened in this chamber will remain between us.”

A clandestine relationship between two cousins in the Yang family could never see the light of day—especially since one of them was a princess and the empress of the previous dynasty.

“I’ve not seen the princess since I took office in Guangqian Commandery in the first year of the Kaihuang era,” Yang Yun returned defensively. “These paintings don’t prove anything!”

Cui Buqu sneered. “And what about the woman outside? And the princess’s former retainer? The emperor and empress have both seen him. What will they think, I wonder? According to law, as a Yang, you’d normally face merely exile for your crimes here. But should they discover the truth, you can forget keeping your life.”

“If that’s true, then they won’t let you escape either!” Yang Yun retorted.

Cui Buqu coughed into his hand. “If Commandery Governor Yang refuses to speak, perhaps I should ask someone else. County Lieutenant Wu Yi and your associates must know something.”

With that, he made to rise.

“Wait!” Yang Yun blurted.

Cui Buqu looked back.

With a hint of reluctance, Yang Yun continued. “I only intended to sell the grain for a little profit. I never plotted rebellion. The idea of donating grain for tax exemptions was suggested to me by a man named Xiao!”

Now that he’d been exposed, it was only natural that he’d push all the blame onto the Thirteen Floors of Yunhai. Cui Buqu didn’t attempt to determine whether or not this was true. Instead, he simply asked, “What was his name? Why did you believe him?”

Lord Xiao had come to Guangqian Commandery three years prior, whereupon he had met the recently promoted Yang Yun through the Li family’s connections. Knowing Yang Yun had a fondness for wealth, Lord Xiao gave him two gold Buddha statues and quickly forged a friendship with him. He then offered several crafty ideas to the ambitious new official.

Yang Yun gradually began to view Lord Xiao as a clever and resourceful ally, and the two grew even closer.

Lord Xiao had claimed to be a southerner, traveling back and forth across the Yangtze River to trade spices. Yang Yun knew the Xiao were a major clan in the Southern dynasty, but chose not to probe further. After all, Lord Xiao's numerous trips brought him significant profits.

But even this wasn't enough to quench Yang Yun's appetite for riches. He next set his sights on the court's granaries.

Based on what he'd heard so far, Cui Buqu was almost certain this Lord Xiao was Xiao Lü himself.

Three years ago, as the Thirteen Floors of Yunhai sought to expand their influence, it would have required extensive provisions and financial support. Xiao Lü had bribed Yang Yun with two gold Buddhas but reaped even greater benefits from the tax-exemption policy. Cui Buqu knew without asking that the taxes exempted by the imperial court over the past two years had found their way into the pockets of local landlords. Xiao Lü must have also had a hand in that, gaining even more significant profits.

If they had stopped there instead of misappropriating the relief grain issued by the court, or if Rong Qing had been slightly less earnest, their operation might have continued undisturbed.

"After this year's flood, it was Lord Xiao who encouraged me to pocket all the grain—"

Cui Buqu raised a hand to interrupt him. "That's not true."

Yang Yun was confused. "What's not true?"

"I don't believe Lord Xiao is the type to be so shortsighted. He's already reaped substantial gains from you and understands not to bite off more than he can chew—acting cautiously allows one to achieve much more in the long run. In your impatience to snatch up all the grain, you left nothing for the flood victims. That's what gave you away. Even Huang Lüe realized the dire consequences and chose to discreetly provide us with information rather than take the fall."

Looking at Yang Yun, Cui Buqu said slowly, "I advise you to be honest. Don't think you can escape judgment simply because Lord Xiao

isn’t here. Was this your idea or his?”

Yang Yun’s eyes flickered. He refused to meet Cui Buqu’s gaze. “Of course it was his idea!”

Cui Buqu sneered. “Commandery Governor Yang, Lord Xiao is from the Thirteen Floors of Yunhai. He’s a man brimming with ambition and ulterior motives. He cooperated with you for two years because he saw long-term benefit for himself; it was never for some paltry relief grain. If you hadn’t fallen out with him, you wouldn’t have been so easily caught. Lord Xiao is skilled enough to hold his own against me for at least a few rounds. Yet now, he’s discarded you like a pawn, fully aware that you’ve lost your value.”

Yang Yun paled. “I don’t know what you’re talking about!” he rasped.

“No matter,” Cui Buqu replied. “You can take your time explaining after we defeat Lord Xiao. The Zuoyue Bureau has plenty of methods to ensure you speak the truth. I’ll hand these paintings and that woman over for the empress to handle.”

“Cui Buqu!” Yang Yun cried, furious. “Didn’t you just promise me?! You lying scoundrel!”

“What did I promise?” Cui Buqu asked innocently. “I can’t remember.”

“You son of a bitch—”

The gold bricks weren’t firmly embedded in the wall. Cui Buqu easily pried one loose and brought it crashing down on Yang Yun’s head and shoulders.

“Help! Murder!” Yang Yun screamed in agony, but his bound legs prevented him from moving more than a few steps. He stumbled and fell to the ground, his pained curses transforming into desperate howls. “Stop! Stop! I’ll tell you everything!” His hair was disheveled, his face streaked with tears and snot. Gone was his neatly groomed appearance and dignified bearing.

“Shouldn’t you be happy I hit you with one of your beloved gold bricks?” Cui Buqu sighed regretfully. “Unfortunately, I’m feeling a bit

weak, or you could have been even happier."

Thank heavens an invalid like you lacks the strength, Yang Yun thought. *Or you'd have beaten me to death!*

Cui Buqu seized his collar and yanked him forward. "Considering the lives you've taken by stealing grain, if I were to kill you here, it wouldn't be too harsh a punishment," Cui Buqu said. He regarded Yang Yun as if regarding a corpse. A chill washed over the governor, and his body stiffened.

"However," Cui Buqu continued. "I am an official of Great Sui. I must abide by the law and cannot enact punishment on you myself." He patted Yang Yun's cheek. "Commandery Governor Yang, do you suffer from seizures? Why did you suddenly slam yourself into the wall and hurt yourself like that?"

Yang Yun was silent.

"Come," Cui Buqu said mildly. "I'll have the doctor treat you when we return."

He extended a hand to help Yang Yun up, but the man recoiled in terror as if encountering a demon. Cui Buqu ignored him and returned aboveground to the study. As he ordered the Zuoyue guards to bring Yang Yun up, the guards of the commandery governor's residence timidly brought him a letter.

Upon it was no address, no signature. Only a single verse:

Though our separation is brief, the longing grows apace. In Zhao's Teahouse, an old friend awaits.

When Pei Jingzhe and Qiao Xian approached, they found him still silently holding the letter.

"Cui-xiansheng, who is that letter from?"

Cui Buqu came back to himself. He said coolly, "Xiao Lü."

Qiao Xian's expression flickered, but Pei Jingzhe gasped. "The pavilion leader of the Thirteen Floors of Yunhai? The demon tyrant?"

Cui Buqu had to smile at that moniker. Xiao Lü's appearance, approach, and manner of speaking were all incongruous with the image of a

demon tyrant. If anyone embodied a “demon tyrant,” perhaps it was Feng Xiao.

Only once had Cui Buqu and Xiao Lü met. The few times they’d come up against each other, they’d crossed blades from afar. Both sides had earned their share of victories and losses.

The Thirteen Floors of Yunhai had successively lost Yuxiu, Go Un, Duan Qihu, Feng Xiaolian, and several other capable agents. But Go Un had been from Goguryeo, so Xiao Lü had used Feng Xiao to eliminate him and gain control over the Buyeo Sect. Duan Qihu had turned against the Thirteen Floors, unwilling to join them in rebellion, so Xiao Lü had taken the chance to dispose of him as well. On the other hand, Cui Buqu’s side had briefly obtained the Jade of Heaven Lake, only to allow it to fall back into enemy hands. Even now, Cui Buqu had yet to capture Xiao Lü.

They were evenly matched. Every time Cui Buqu faced off against Xiao Lü, even he couldn’t predict the winner until the very last moment.

“I’ll go, Lord Chief.” Qiao Xian dropped to one knee, bowing her head to await his command.

“You wish to go?” Cui Buqu looked at the bun atop her head, his expression inscrutable.

“Yes.”

“Xiao Lü’s martial arts are on par with Feng Xiao’s. He’s likely to appear in person this time, and you stand no chance against him. Even so, do you still wish to go?”

“I do.”

Pei Jingzhe looked at the two of them in confusion, but didn’t interrupt.

“Then you may,” said Cui Buqu.

Qiao Xian tightened her grip on her scabbard and rose to her feet.

“Come back alive.”

Qiao Xian’s heart trembled. “This subordinate will do her best.”

Pei Jingzhe hurriedly intervened. “Xiao Lü is incredibly strong. How do you expect to beat him alone…”

Qiao Xian ignored him and smoothly leapt onto her horse. With a clear cry, she and the steed galloped away and disappeared into the vast night.

“Are you sending her to her death?!” Pei Jingzhe shouted at Cui Buqu, unable to contain himself. He mounted his horse and chased after her.

Cui Buqu watched them leave and said to Guan Shanhai, “We’re going to Fengyun Tavern.”

Guan Shanhai was puzzled. “Isn’t Deputy Chief Feng already there?”

Cui Buqu sighed. “That’s why we have to go. This letter proves there’s no one at Zhao’s Teahouse. Xiao Lü will do everything in his power to kill Feng Xiao at Fengyun Tavern.”

Understanding dawned on Guan Shanhai. “You deliberately sent Qiao Xian to Zhao’s Teahouse to save her life.”

“Since she’s made her choice, I’ll protect her.” Cui Buqu mounted his own horse and spurred it to a gallop. “Let’s go be the heroes who rescue the beauty!”

Guan Shanhai was seriously injured and had yet to heal. At these words, he sputtered and almost choked to death right then and there. *One of us is sick, and the other is wounded—how are we supposed to rescue anyone? We’ll just be a snack for our enemies!*

But Cui Buqu was already riding away. Guan Shanhai had no choice but to steel himself to risk his life at his lord’s side as he urged his horse in pursuit.

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In Guangqian County, there was a street with a lovely name: the Long Alley of Peach Blossoms. At the end of this street lay Fengyun Tavern.

Come midnight, three figures stood before the tavern door, identical in all ways, from their silhouettes to their facial features. The heavy scent of blood wafted off of them. Had they not been cloaked in black robes, the

crimson stains would have been visible on their garments. Whether it was their blood or the blood of their foes was impossible to discern.

One Feng Xiao held a blood-stained fan. He said in disdain, “Can I please put this thing down now?”

Another Feng Xiao kindly reminded him, “Even if you throw away the fan, your clothes are stained with blood.”

The first Feng Xiao stamped his foot. “You’re awful! Are you suggesting I take off my clothes?!”

The second Feng Xiao said indignantly, “When did I say that?”

The third Feng Xiao couldn’t contain himself any longer. “Can you stop making those expressions with my face?!”

The first Feng Xiao smiled sweetly. “Deputy Chief, I want to return to my own face as well. But look, these stupid dogs are blocking the way and refuse to leave. Can’t you drive them off? Heaven knows I need to bathe and change my clothes—the smell of blood is making me nauseous!”

“Qin Miaoyu,” Feng Xiao warned, “try acting cute with my face again, and you won’t like the consequences.”

The first Feng Xiao finally fell silent.

The second Feng Xiao opened his mouth to speak but was interrupted by the third. “Ming Yue, shut up.”

Just ahead in the middle of the street, the young leader of the Jinhuan Guild, Leng Du, stood with six of his own martial experts, waiting in formation.

This was the second challenge.

Feng Xiao, Ming Yue, and Qin Miaoyu had spent two full hours eliminating eleven experts in the tavern. The only one who’d managed to slip their net was Yuan Sansi, and he’d fled with grave injuries.

But for this, they’d paid a significant price.

Qin Miaoyu’s right arm hung at an unnatural angle, blood dripping steadily from the wound. Her attempts at humor were merely to distract herself from the pain. Ming Yue, beside her, had suffered a wound to his

abdomen. Though he'd sealed his acupoints to staunch the bleeding, the damage to his cultivation was severe—he required urgent treatment.

As for Feng Xiao, it was impossible to tell if he had sustained any injuries at all. He looked the same as ever.

"Leng Du, adopted son of Ning Shewo. Since your father doesn't dare face us himself, he's sent you to meet your end. If I were in your shoes, I'd leave while you still can." Qin Miaoyu sighed.

"By joining the Thirteen Floors of Yunhai, Ning Shewo has made a tremendous gamble with the lives and fortunes of the entire Jinhuan Guild," Ming Yue added. "You're his adopted son, but you also serve as the young leader of the Jinhuan Guild. Whether for the sake of righteousness or your own personal interests, you should know what choice to make."

Both Qin Miaoyu and Ming Yue had impersonated Feng Xiao. But though their act had been impressive, Qin Miaoyu was a mediocre martial artist, and Ming Yue was unaccustomed to playing the zither. Feng Xiao had done most of the work.

Their enemies wouldn't fall for the ruse a second time.

Leng Du truly embodied his surname—*cold*. His face was as calm as still water as he drew his blade from its scabbard, his gaze fixed on Feng Xiao. "It's true that you've just defeated twelve experts in a row, but even I can see you've sustained injuries. Should you manage to survive this round, there are more enemies waiting for you. Why not surrender? That way I can hand you over to my superiors."

"Deputy Chief." Qin Miaoyu pouted. "I'm no good with the zither strings. Earlier, I barely managed to avoid slicing off my arm. This time, let me use a weapon I'm actually skilled with."

Feng Xiao sneered. "Play cute with me while wearing my face one more time, and I'll sew your mouth shut!"

The instant he said the word *shut*, he lunged toward Leng Du.

Leng Du's eyes went wide.

He'd known of Feng Xiao's exceptional strength. Even experts like Yuxiu and Fan Yun had struggled against him; Leng Du and the six experts of the Jinhuan Guild could only fare worse. Despite their impressive titles,

they were unlikely to last more than a few moves against a martial artist of Feng Xiao's caliber.

However, that was under normal circumstances.

Feng Xiao had just emerged from a ferocious battle in the tavern. No matter how skilled he was, he had to be exhausted. If Leng Du could seriously injure him, the night's endeavor would not be in vain.

Even so, he was caught off guard by the sheer speed of Feng Xiao's qinggong. Feng Xiao sailed toward Leng Du like a ghost, silent as the flowing clouds.

The moment Feng Xiao appeared in front of him, Leng Du unsheathed his blade. But before he could strike, a powerful force seized his hand and forced his saber back into its scabbard. Excruciating pain ripped through his chest as the meridians of his heart were severed.

Leng Du fell down dead, face frozen in an expression of disbelief.

The six experts erupted into shouts, all moving in to avenge their young guild leader. Feng Xiao shot into the air. In a single step he was behind them, turning to raise his hand as zither strings shot out and targeted three of his attackers.

Of the five strings he'd brought, two had been lost in the tavern. He was left with only three. At least six lives had been claimed by those three strings, and they stank of blood. Normally Feng Xiao would have thrown them away in disgust, but tonight he had to hold his nose and reuse them.

Six experts, three strings. He could only strike half of his attackers.

Ming Yue and Qin Miaoyu also sprang into action. Ming Yue wielded a long sword, while Qin Miaoyu flourished her sleeves, the pair's murderous intent converging into a chilling light that surged toward their foes.

Thunder rumbled ominously overhead, and the clouds crackled with lightning, an omen of storms to come. The sound echoed like the beat of a war drum urging on the night's bloody slaughter. On the Long Alley of Peach Blossoms, what fell upon the dark stones wasn't flower petals, but splatters of blood that bloomed across the stones. From now on, perhaps the name would carry a different connotation.

The battle sprawled over the street. Blades flashed and glinted, while bloodlust boiled the air. Both sides of the street lay in eerie silence, as if the surrounding houses were uninhabited. Six people fell to the ground alongside their young guild leader, one after another, their eyes wide open in death.

Qin Miaoyu staggered two steps before her legs buckled. She collapsed, retching blood.

At the sight of her, Feng Xiao abruptly said, “Cui Buqu looks much better when he vomits blood.”

Qin Miaoyu was speechless. She longed to grab one of the Jinhuan Guild’s sabers and hurl it at Feng Xiao, but she didn’t dare. Since she’d switched allegiances from the Buyeo Sect to the Jiejian Bureau, she’d relied on Feng Xiao for her survival. Besides, despite having killed so many, Feng Xiao’s face wasn’t even flushed, as if he hadn’t exerted himself at all. The man was terrifying.

Ming Yue, though not spitting blood, was struggling to stand. His face had taken on an alarming blue cast. He stumbled over to a wall and slid down to regulate his breathing, aware that greater challenges lay ahead.

“Who else is there?” Qin Miaoyu cried out. “What are you waiting for? Get the hell out here!”

“You’re injured; save your strength,” Ming Yue cautioned.

Feng Xiao gave him a light kick. “Can you stop making such an honest expression with my face?”

But they didn’t have to wait long. The enemy had answered Qin Miaoyu’s call and gotten the hell out there.

This time, it was only one person.

He came from the far end of the street, sauntering toward them as if he’d come to the Long Alley of Peach Blossoms to admire the flowers rather than take their lives. He held an umbrella overhead.

At first, Qin Miaoyu thought he was a passerby who had mistakenly wandered over. She urged him gently, “This place is dangerous; you should go.”

Feng Xiao frowned. “He only looks respectable; do you really think an ordinary person would take a stroll here in the dead of night? Keep this up and you can forget about staying in the Jiejian Bureau. I don’t suffer fools.”

“We’re all exhausted,” said Qin Miaoyu indignantly. “You want to keep fighting and killing? If we can say a few kind words and convince him to leave, won’t that save us a lot of trouble?”

Feng Xiao shattered her fantasy without mercy. “Enough. That’s the pavilion leader of the Thirteen Floors of Yunhai.”

What? Qin Miaoyu stared in shock, looking back at the newcomer. It was hard to believe this gentle, elegant, and refined young man was, in fact, their most formidable enemy.

Xiao Lü chuckled softly and stopped a short distance away. “Deputy Chief Feng. How are you?”

“If you want to fight, let’s fight,” Feng Xiao said, impatient. “Don’t waste my time.”

Xiao Lü looked at him with sympathy. “You’ve just been injured. If we fight now, I fear you won’t stand a chance. Better to rest a bit first—I prefer a fair fight.”

If you want a fair fight, why did you send so many people earlier?! Feng Xiao wanted to shout. But on consideration, he decided to save his strength for the inevitable confrontation. He knew Xiao Lü was right.

Many martial artists could detect and influence each other’s qi. He could feel Xiao Lü’s presence, which meant Xiao Lü could sense his condition too. Qin Miaoyu was as good as empty air—there was no point relying on her. Ming Yue was strong, but he wouldn’t stand a chance against Xiao Lü, especially in his current state.

As for Feng Xiao, although he’d have been happy to fight Xiao Lü under normal circumstances, the battle in the tavern had drained much of his strength. Leng Du’s group had proved easier to handle than Yuan Sansi’s, but Feng Xiao’s accumulated injuries had also been aggravated in the fight and were becoming increasingly difficult to manage.

Xiao Lü had planned it all out. But retreat was not an option. The moment Feng Xiao withdrew, Cui Buqu would be in danger.

“The last time we met, it must have been difficult for you to feign incompetence and lose to me. Someone as proud as you are must find it unbearable. I expect you’ll do all you can to beat me today. But experts are everywhere in this world. It’s a pity—even if you manage to beat me, you still won’t be the best,” Feng Xiao said.

Xiao Lü smiled faintly. “Why would I want to be the best? I am merely a rebel, not a member of the jianghu. Are you worried I’ll harm Cui Buqu? Don’t worry, Deputy Chief Feng, I won’t kill him. The only one I want dead today is you.”

As his last words rang out, the sound of galloping hooves echoed in the distance. The two men fell silent, listening intently. Through the night fog, they spotted a tall and slender figure charging toward them on horseback, cloak billowing behind him in the wind.

Xiao Lü started as he recognized the rider. He turned to Feng Xiao, who appeared equally surprised. The newcomer pulled back on the reins, and the horse reared up with a long whinny.

“Chief Cui.” Feng Xiao scoffed, his expression icy. “You have a nose as keen as a dog’s. You show up wherever there’s trouble! Xiao Lü is my prey. Today, it’s the Jiejian Bureau who will capture him. If you dare interfere, I’ll kill you first.”

“Feng Yuntian.”

Cui Buqu’s expression was obscured by the fog. Only his familiar voice remained unchanged. “The question you asked me yesterday—I can answer it now. My answer is: I would.”

Feng Xiao’s breath caught. What had he asked him yesterday?

Would you entrust your back to me?

Chapter 148

THE NIGHT MIST CLUNG to the man's silhouette, but Feng Xiao could visualize it without needing to look. A slender figure clad in wide-sleeved robes that whispered in the autumn breeze. If the wind picked up or a particularly frosty gust hit, it might easily fell this invalid and leave him bedridden for weeks. Perhaps it would put him in his grave, and the world would be rid of one more scourge.

The man's lips were very thin; right now, they'd be pressed tight against the cold. The mouth they belonged to mirrored the nature of its owner: harsh and merciless, faster and sharper than any sword, capable of making someone choke to death on their own rage. The hands gripping the reins would be pale: not from exertion, but from the biting chill. This cool autumn weather was merely an inconvenience for others, but for Cui Buqu, it was a significant obstacle.

The matter of Yang Yun must have been resolved by now. While others might have viewed the encounter as a deadly trial, Cui Buqu was accustomed to even greater twists and turns. He meticulously calculated the motives of those around him, and his presence here now was a clear indication that Yang Yun had posed no challenge at all.

Cui Buqu should have been sitting in the governor's residence, holding a hand stove to warm himself as he gave orders and awaited reports of success. Not galloping here in the middle of the night to attend a far more dangerous appointment.

The corners of Feng Xiao's mouth curled slightly, but his words cut like blades of frost. "You'd what? Fall for my charms? Cui Buqu, you think too highly of yourself. You consider yourself clever, but in my eyes, you're no more than a withered branch on the verge of death. If not for the name of the Zuoyue Bureau, I'd never have bothered with you. Take a good look in the mirror. Is there anything about you worth my attention?"

There was no sound in the dark night; Feng Xiao's disdain echoed over the empty street. "I'm afraid I'll lose my appetite if I keep looking at

your face. Get the hell out of here before I get rid of you myself. Do you hear me? Go!”

Cui Buqu remained still, not dismounting, not even responding. Perhaps Feng Xiao’s words had pricked him, for he lingered there in silence.

Confused, Ming Yue looked at Feng Xiao. He opened his mouth to speak but could think of nothing to say. Qin Miaoyu sighed quietly. Who said women were the capricious ones? When men lied about their desires, they were the equal of any woman.

“Cui-xiong, you heard Deputy Chief Feng.” Xiao Lü’s tone was gentle, without a hint of anger. “I believe I left a letter asking to meet you at Zhao’s Teahouse.”

“It’s precisely because you invited me to Zhao’s Teahouse that I knew you would come looking for Feng Xiao here,” Cui Buqu said calmly. No one could tell whether Feng Xiao’s words had affected him.

Xiao Lü sighed. “I didn’t want to kill you, which is why I tried to mislead you. If you knew that, why walk willingly into danger?”

“Yang Yun may be captured, but he won’t tell us where the grain is hidden. Thus I have no choice but to ask you, Pavilion Leader Xiao.”

“It’s gone.” Xiao Lü said bluntly.

“All of it?”

Xiao Lü smiled. “I gave you Yang Yun and took the grain. Isn’t that fair? The man responsible is in custody, and you have an explanation for the emperor. I’ll consider the grain my reward.”

Cui Buqu nodded. “It is indeed fair.”

“Cui-xiong,” Xiao Lü said good-naturedly, “though Fan Yun betrayed me, I’ve always admired you. We’re two of a kind—so I know you’re too proud to join my side without thinking it through. I’ll deal with Feng Xiao first. With the Jiejian Bureau out of the way, you’ll have one less opponent. You’ll have the best of both worlds. Isn’t that wonderful?”

Of everyone present, only Feng Xiao posed a genuine challenge to Xiao Lü. He could have dispatched Cui Buqu in an instant, yet he took time to patiently explain his intentions. Feng Xiao sneered in deep displeasure.

Cui Buqu looked toward Xiao Lü's right hand, obscured by his wide sleeve. He wasn't concealing it intentionally; both his sleeves were of equal length. But his withered right arm was shorter than his left, leaving his right hand tucked out of view. If not for this disability and the scorn it provoked, Xiao Lü would likely occupy a high position in the Chen imperial court. Even with this disadvantage, had he been willing to set aside his pride, to flatter and submit to his superiors, in time, his capabilities would have secured him a role as a general or minister.

But Xiao Lü was too proud. He was indeed very much like Cui Buqu, who had preferred to venture into the wilderness and perish rather than remain in the Cui residence and accept the food they disdainfully offered.

In tumultuous times, anyone could become a voice of rebellion and question whether kings were born or made. Anyone could become a leader capable of heralding change. Xiao Lü's pride forbade him from bowing his head—it compelled him to choose the hardest path.

The most chaotic periods of the Central Plains' history had passed. Although the world remained divided between the Northern and Southern dynasties, it was a far cry from the era of the Sixteen Kingdoms two centuries prior. Xiao Lü had been born at an inopportune time. The heavens had endowed him with the potential to be a man of great change, yet the emerging Sui dynasty loomed before him, and his intellectual equal Cui Buqu stood in his way.

Xiao Lü waited patiently for Cui Buqu's response, fully aware he might simply be stalling for time. After the incident at Qixia Villa, Yang Yun had feared Cui Buqu and his companions might uncover the grain and had agreed to meet Xiao Lü's demands. While Cui Buqu and his allies were dealing with the commandery governor, Xiao Lü had been directing his men to transport the grain out of the county in batches.

Feng Xiao's demise was merely a trophy to collect along the way. In this round of their game, Xiao Lü knew he had already claimed victory and regained his lost ground.

"There's something I neglected to mention," Cui Buqu said suddenly. "Did you never wonder why I brought only a few people to Guangqian County? I didn't even post any Zuoyue guards nearby, leaving us at a

marked disadvantage against Yang Yun. It's because, before setting out, I deployed them elsewhere to complete a more crucial task.

"Fan Yun knew quite a bit about the Thirteen Floors of Yunhai. With his help—and with a common enemy in you, Pavilion Leader Xiao—we successfully dismantled a villa called Lingbo. I believe the name must ring a bell for you."

Cui Buqu continued placidly, "I heard Lingbo Villa housed most of the forces you've been relying on for years while operating in the Southern dynasty. While the leaders of the Thirty-Three Rooms may not compare to those of the Thirteen Floors, they are undoubtedly elite members of your organization, including several skilled in astronomy, geography, divination, mathematics, and various other disciplines. I've just received word that eighty to ninety percent of those individuals have been eliminated, while the remaining were injured and fled amid the chaos. I fear they won't be much help moving forward.

"Pavilion Leader Xiao must have invested considerable effort in recruiting those individuals. How unfortunate that while you were attending to us here, your own backyard was ablaze. Tell me, do you think the grain you got here was worth the annihilation of one of your lairs?"

Xiao Lü's eyes narrowed, and the smile gradually faded from his lips. The corners of his mouth flattened to reveal a hint of coldness. "Cui Buqu, you always bring me such joyous surprises. If I'd discovered you sooner and brought you into the Thirteen Floors of Yunhai then, the Sui dynasty would be the one in ruins now. After Fan Yun betrayed me, I shifted all my resources in the Southern dynasty elsewhere. I never imagined he would still find them."

"Pavilion Leader Xiao, don't forget that Fan Yun has ties to the emperor of Chen," Cui Buqu replied. "While he may oppose the growth of the Sui dynasty, he certainly won't let the Thirteen Floors of Yunhai become a threat to the south. As they say, the enemy of my enemy is my friend—what's wrong with cooperating with him just this once?"

"If your intention was to provoke me, you've succeeded." Xiao Lü stepped toward him, as leisurely as before—but in the blink of an eye, he was in front of Cui Buqu. He snatched him off the horse, gripping his shoulder so tightly he couldn't move an inch. By the time Guan Shanhai

reacted, it was too late; with a wave of his sleeve, Xiao Lü sent the guard crashing to the ground several yards away. The dull thud of his body hitting the stone made everyone wince.

“I am your greatest foe, not Feng Xiao,” Cui Buqu said. “I’m the empress’s trusted aide, and my Zuoyue Bureau handles the most sensitive cases. Don’t you want to capture me, torture me, and extract intel about the Northern dynasty?”

Cui Buqu’s shoulder blade was being crushed under Xiao Lü’s hand, and the agony made it nearly impossible for him to speak. Yet conversely, the pain sharpened his mind. He knew Xiao Lü wouldn’t kill him; otherwise it would be Cui Buqu’s throat under his fingers rather than his shoulder. “Whether Feng Xiao dies today or tomorrow makes no difference. Isn’t a living Cui Buqu much more valuable than a dead Feng Xiao?”

“You refuse to join the Thirteen Floors of Yunhai,” said Xiao Lü softly. “Why would I want a Cui Buqu who’d rather die than submit?”

Cui Buqu closed his eyes, attempting to steady his breathing amid the pain. “I’ll join. I ask Pavilion Leader Xiao to accept me.”

Xiao Lü chuckled. “And then what? You’ll become the next Fan Yun and betray me?”

“Within three years, I’ll topple the Southern dynasty for you.” Cui Buqu coughed a few times. He was as pale as a ghost. “On the condition that you do not harm anyone here tonight.”

Xiao Lü sighed quietly. “Is it worth it, for a single Feng Xiao?”

Cui Buqu’s lips parted. Though he made no sound, Xiao Lü saw him mouth the words: *Worth it.*

Feng Xiao moved.

He shouldn’t have. After the injuries he’d sustained, he’d need to regulate his breathing for half a day at least before he had the strength to fight again. Yet he attacked with lightning speed, as swift and fluid as a wisp of smoke or cloud as he swept toward Xiao Lü.

Regardless of how confident Xiao Lü was of his victory, when faced with a martial artist of Feng Xiao’s caliber, even he couldn’t fight while

holding Cui Buqu. He released him and met Feng Xiao's attack. Within seconds, they were embroiled in a fierce battle.

Cui Buqu crumpled. His shoulder blade was shattered, leaving one side of his body immobilized. It was all he could do to simply lie there.

Qin Miaoyu rushed over and helped him up. She gingerly examined his wound, gasping when she felt warm blood on her hand.

"I have medicine for internal and external injuries in my lapels," Cui Buqu said. The Zuoyue Bureau chief's chronic illnesses had practically turned him into a doctor himself. Since he was often injured, he always carried medicine with him. "Give them to Ming Yue and Guan Shanhai too."

Qin Miaoyu wasted no time. She quickly retrieved the medicine bottle and shook out a large pill. "Should this humble lady go to the tavern and find some water for you?"

"No need."

Upon witnessing someone with Feng Xiao's face call themselves a *humble lady*, Cui Buqu's shoulder ached even more fiercely. He quickly sent her off to administer medicine to the others.

Before them, the battle between Feng Xiao and Xiao Lü had just begun.

In the eyes of onlookers, the two figures resembled flickering shadows. At times they clashed midair, at others, they appeared to materialize atop the tavern's roof. Speed against speed, force against force.

The roof tiles shattered and split under their feet, and the roof collapsed with a resounding crash. Walls cracked, dust flew, and the battered tavern was reduced to rubble.

Both were oblivious to the fact that their battleground had shifted from the tavern roof back to the street. The tiles splintered and flew, held aloft by the force of their qi as if they were mere toys designed to test their strength. The debris formed a barrier that isolated Cui Buqu and the others from the conflict.

Feng Xiao and Xiao Lü's movements suddenly slowed.

Like sprays of ink ebbing away over white paper, the whirling tiles gradually fell aside, leaving the adversaries standing like a pair of jutting rocks teetering precariously at the edge of a cliff. Facing each other at a distance of an arm's length, the two men seemed as fragile as stacked eggs; one misstep would send them plummeting into the abyss below.

Feng Xiao's martial arts had reached an extraordinary peak. After utilizing the two sarira, his skills had ascended to even greater heights, easily placing him among the ranks of grandmasters. But Xiao Lü was not one to be outdone. And not only was he strong, as he himself had implied, he had strength to spare.

Ming Yue and Guan Shanhai were both competent martial artists, but even they couldn't gauge Xiao Lü's true strength. How absurd that rather than pursue greater achievements in martial arts, such a talented person had instead fixated on his desire to usurp the throne. And yet how many of the jianghu's countless experts had met their own downfall in their quest for martial supremacy? Perhaps no one could say Xiao Lü had made the wrong choice.

Everyone had their own ambitions.

Qin Miaoyu watched him intently as he fought. “He… Xiao Lü used the Jade of Heaven Lake!” she cried in dismay.

Ming Yue’s face fell.

To demonstrate his sincerity in joining the Thirteen Floors of Yunhai, Feng Xiao had taken the Jade of Heaven Lake from the palace and presented it to Fan Yun. During the later chaos, while Fan Yun was preoccupied battling others, the jade had vanished; until now, its whereabouts had been a mystery. Apparently Xiao Lü had put it to good use.

In Liugong City, Qin Miaoyu had briefly possessed the Jade of Heaven Lake and secretly used it to enhance her training, gaining some insight into its wonders. If she hadn’t, she would never have been a strong enough martial artist to deceive the enemy into thinking she was Feng Xiao, even for a moment. Despite her limited knowledge, the Jade of Heaven Lake had significantly enhanced Qin Miaoyu’s internal strength. Such a tool would be even more effective in Xiao Lü’s hands. Perhaps he’d already absorbed the entire stone—no wonder he exuded such confidence. With his vast internal strength, he might have no equal in the jianghu. Although Feng Xiao possessed the enhancement of the sarira, could he truly compare?

Qin Miaoyu dared not say any more for fear of distracting Feng Xiao. When confronting such a formidable opponent, even the slightest misstep could determine the outcome of the battle. Her thoughts raced.

Feng Xiao and Xiao Lü swept toward each other. The shattered tiles surrounding them seemed to respond even faster than the two combatants, as if held in a massive, invisible hand that tightened its grip.

The fragments exploded with an earthshaking *boom*, scattering shards in all directions.

Chapter 149

PROPELLED BY QI, the debris exploded outward. The onlookers had no time to dodge; fragments of tile sliced toward them, opening bloody scratches on their heads and faces.

The two fighters remained unscathed in the eye of the storm, shielded by their qi. Yet they faced no less pressure than the onlookers. Feng Xiao couldn't guess Xiao Lü's thoughts at that moment, but he himself only had one: When swimming against the current, one must keep pushing forward or be swept away.

In their previous fight, Xiao Lü had concealed his identity and feigned incompetence; Feng Xiao had been unable to assess his true abilities. This time, though mentally prepared, he was still secretly shocked by the strength of his opponent. Xiao Lü, having fully absorbed the Jade of Heaven Lake, now possessed unfathomable internal power. Supported by this vast reservoir of energy, his martial arts had reached unprecedented heights.

Feng Xiao really might find victory difficult to achieve. But even if his odds were slim, he couldn't afford to lose.

Fengyun Tavern lay in ruins around them. The two men traded strikes amid the debris, their palms colliding thrice. Xiao Lü sustained a blow to the shoulder, while Feng Xiao took a strike to the ribs. They both fell back three steps, but a keen observer could spot the subtle difference between them—Xiao Lü's steps were smaller than Feng Xiao's.

But Xiao Lü didn't press his attack. He pulled back, waiting for Feng Xiao to reveal a weakness.

Feng Xiao waited as well, secretly regulating his breathing. Qi rose from the dantian in one's lower abdomen, then split at the Baihui point at the top of the head, flowing down into the rest of the body in two streams. As he breathed, his injured meridians were soothed, showing gradual signs of recovery. But it wasn't enough. Xiao Lü wouldn't give him time to heal. He was only biding his time until he saw the perfect moment to strike.

Qi swirled around them, current and countercurrent, gently testing one another. The instant one of them withdrew, the peaceful facade would drop, and the qi would swirl up, savage and howling.

Dark clouds swarmed overhead, and heavy raindrops began to fall. The combatants seemed not to notice as they let the rain soak their clothes.

Feng Xiao closed his eyes, plunging himself into an endless darkness where light and shadow faded. His qi waned like rain clouds chased by the wind—struggling to gather despite the futility of their efforts.

Xiao Lü shot forward. Brandishing a bare longsword, he moved with the same swiftness as his sword glare. It painted a dazzling streak through the rainy night as he hurtled toward Feng Xiao like a shooting star.

Resigned, Feng Xiao watched him come. The sword glare bore down on him, yet he merely pressed a hand to his injured abdomen in apparent disregard for the danger.

Qin Miaoyu gasped. Her sweaty palms were so cold she forgot she was still sitting in a puddle of muddy rainwater. Feng Xiao was their only hope right now. If he fell, Cui Buqu might survive, but Xiao Lü would show no mercy to the rest. What was more, Qin Miaoyu originally hailed from the Buyeo Sect, which was loyal to the Thirteen Floors of Yunhai. She was a traitor to Xiao Lü.

Initially, she'd joined the Jiejian Bureau merely to save herself, but over time she'd grown accustomed to her new life. The Buyeo Sect's members were spies and assassins; they couldn't operate in the open. While the Jiejian Bureau, too, completed clandestine missions from time to time, the atmosphere was nothing like the harsh indifference of the Buyeo Sect. At least she had a kind-hearted boss like Ming Yue and a dimwitted but easy-to-bully colleague like Pei Jingzhe.

But her survival tonight didn't depend on her. Qin Miaoyu could only hope that Feng Xiao, who prided himself on being best in the world, would demonstrate his true prowess tonight. At the very least he ought to show some compassion for his pitiful subordinates, who earned meager salaries and were always running to and fro.

She couldn't resist sneaking a look at the man beside her. Cui Buqu was also watching the fight. Qin Miaoyu had sealed his acupoints to stop

the bleeding, but this didn’t alleviate the pain. His shoulder blade remained shattered.

Qin Miaoyu understood that kind of pain. She’d once suffered a broken arm in a fight. The agony had been unbearable, only eased through groans and tears. But Cui Buqu didn’t shed a tear or utter a single groan. He remained silent, keenly observing the unfolding battle as if he wasn’t injured at all.

What strength of will was required to ignore such bone-crushing pain? Qin Miaoyu couldn’t imagine it.

A loud *bang* echoed over the street as qi collided. She whirled to see that Xiao Lü’s sword glare had halted just two fingers’ width from Feng Xiao. Feng Xiao’s palm flipped smoothly from his abdomen into an open-handed strike aimed at Xiao Lü’s face. At the same moment, his other hand unleashed a string.

The string and sword qi collided with a thunderous roar, and the two sprang apart. They touched down on opposite eaves, landing lightly as drifting feathers, their footing as steady as a mountain. After a beat, a stream of bright crimson trickled from the corner of Feng Xiao’s mouth.

Xiao Lü remained serene, sword in one hand and his other arm tucked behind his back.

Qin Miaoyu was shocked. *Oh no.* Her boss was clearly the one at a disadvantage.

Yet strangely, Xiao Lü didn’t attempt a finishing blow. Sword glare and zither string clashed again, but this time, it felt as though the two had reached some unspoken understanding. Neither struck with their full power, cautiously testing one another as they advanced and retreated, light and shadow weaving together in the rain. While this jousting of qi was thrilling in itself, it lacked the spectacle of a life-and-death struggle.

Could it be that Xiao Lü had been enchanted by her boss’s handsome face and couldn’t bear to end the life of this incredible beauty? But that was impossible. From what she’d seen, Xiao Lü might have some sympathy for Cui Buqu, but he would show no mercy to Feng Xiao. And given Feng Xiao’s pride, it was impossible for him to truly compromise and act the submissive wife, as he was doing now.

There had to be something she’d missed.

Qin Miaoyu was baffled, but Feng Xiao knew exactly what had happened. He’d played a little trick, taking advantage of the rain and night fog as cover to intertwine three zither strings into one. With a swift flick, the string had split again and struck Xiao Lü in the lower abdomen. Now that his opponent was also injured, things were a little fairer. Feng Xiao smirked.

Xiao Lü flipped his wrist, unleashing a sword glare that undulated like the tide crashing in waves upon the shore. It came toward Feng Xiao like a mountain on the brink of collapse, boulders and pine trees tumbling from its peak. Like Mount Tai crumbling or the Yellow River breaching its banks, heaven and earth shook as the rocks collapsed and the waters surged up.

This attack was nature manifest, great enough to astonish even the gods. Feng Xiao felt as though he was walking alone at the foot of a towering mountain caving in on itself, struggling against a relentless flood. Pressure closed in around him, stifling his movements and forcing him backward. He felt an overwhelming urge to kneel and plead for mercy, to beg the unforgiving heavens to spare his life.

As he gazed around his mind’s eye, all he could see was desolation. Everything but the mountain had been reduced to ashes. Those who prided themselves on being blessed by heaven were but a drop in the ocean, insignificant amid such profound change. The heavens and earth, the wind and rain, all howled at him to kneel and submit, just as those already consumed by the torrent had—lowering their heads to the ground before dissolving into ashes as their souls scattered away.

But how could Feng Xiao submit? His lip curled in a sneer.

As far back as Feng Xiao could remember, he had never knelt before heaven and earth, let alone cried or begged for mercy. People pleaded with him. He had never pleaded with others.

He came as he pleased, left as he liked. The wealth and nobility of the human world, the ultimate summit of martial arts, the heavenly will as it was wrought upon the secular realm—he didn’t give a damn about any of it!

If Feng Xiao failed tonight, that invalid would be taken away without his approval. Since when could anyone else decide where Cui Buqu would go and whether he would live or die?

If my almighty self cannot, neither can Xiao Lü!

At that moment, Feng Xiao felt as if he'd broken free of some unseen shackle. He had been confined by the world's rules, but now he realized that both the laws of heaven and the laws of society stemmed from the fragmented chaos of the void. And if they were established from something fragmented, why couldn't he fragment what had already been established?

His skills had greatly improved after absorbing the two sarira, but they remained constrained within his current limits. A persistent fog hung thick before him, preventing him from making any progress. But now, in this moment of desperation, he grasped the path to survival. He cleared the mist and uncovered blue sky beyond, igniting his heart with fighting spirit. His mind was crystal clear.

There were no enemies, there was no Xiao Lü, there was no towering wave of sword qi in front of him. There was only the mountain.

When obstructed by a mountain, blast through the stone. When obstructed by a river, split the waters.

Feng Xiao raised his hand. Three strings shot forward, launching like glittering arrows toward the breach in the raging mountain torrent.

As far as Xiao Lü was concerned, his sword glare was near-flawless. It had transcended all boundaries, and almost no one in the world could overcome it. The only possible weakness lay in the sword glare's angle when it clashed with the opponent's true qi. Still, in a life-and-death battle between experts, it was impossible to predict every outcome. Minor flaws were insignificant. He didn't want to waste any more time battling Feng Xiao. Though his opponent's skills were formidable, they still fell short of his own—that difference would decide the battle's outcome.

The sword glare burst forth like a rainbow, illuminating the dark skies. The three strings swept forward, each taking a slightly different trajectory. With absolute precision, one slid into the gap created by the slight deviation of the sword glare as it collided with Feng Xiao's qi.

Xiao Lü's eyes widened. He hadn't expected that, in such dire straits, Feng Xiao could still launch a counterattack. He grew even more determined to kill him here tonight.

In the blink of an eye, his opponent closed the distance, deflecting the sword glare with his strings as he flew forward. Concentrating all his qi into his palm, Feng Xiao struck, leaving Xiao Lu no way to evade.

Qin Miaoyu's wide-open eyes saw two shadowy figures, thin as wispy smoke, separate. Quiet coughs and muffled groans echoed through the debris, leaving her unable to discern which man the sound came from.

While she hesitated, Ming Yue leapt into action, as if he'd been preparing for this moment all along. He jumped up from the ground, charged toward Xiao Lü, and struck out with his palm.

Xiao Lü and Ming Yue's palms slammed into each other. The third chief crumpled to the ground like a broken paper kite, but Xiao Lü too staggered back several steps. He wasn't smiling anymore—only cold murderous intent remained.

As he glanced over, a chill ran through Qin Miaoyu's heart, and her body went stiff. But Xiao Lü's eyes didn't settle on her. His gaze swept past, alighting on Cui Buqu for the briefest moment.

Xiao Lü's cold voice reached their ears, but the man himself had drifted away. "Looks like I must ask Cui-xiong for pointers some other time. I won't forget the humiliation of Lingbo Villa's destruction."

Qin Miaoyu was momentarily stunned. She asked stupidly, "He left, just like that?"

Ming Yue pushed himself up into all fours and coughed up several mouthfuls of blood mingled with shredded flesh. He'd clearly sustained severe internal injuries from Xiao Lü's last palm strike.

"He was seriously injured," Cui Buqu said softly. "He still had some strength left, but so did Feng Xiao. Xiao Lü couldn't guarantee his victory, so he left."

Feng Xiao was incredulous. "I was the one who stymied him just now. Why did he only say farewell to you?"

Cui Buqu's face was drawn, yet his eyes remained bright and keen. A hint of a smile flickered within them, softening that sharp edge and lending a gentleness to the raindrops that fell around him. "Maybe because the only opponent he cares about is me?"

Feng Xiao snorted coldly. "If you both admire each other so much, why not just go with him?"

He advanced slowly toward Cui Buqu, still cloaked in bloodlust and murderous intent, like an evil Asura or the lord of the underworld.

Qin Miaoyu lifted her gaze and saw Feng Xiao's cold eyes. Just as when Xiao Lü had glanced at her earlier, she felt the blood in her veins turn to ice. Her reason screamed for her to run away, yet her body remained frozen.

Yet Cui Buqu had the presence of mind to sigh with regret. "He left too quickly; there wasn't time."

Feng Xiao strode up and dropped to one knee before him, though only to make it easier to look down on him. "You could have easily stayed in your secure governor's residence and let us mutilate each other. What on earth possessed you to come all the way here?"

"Just passing by."

"I saw you say 'worth it.'"

"You must be blind."

Feng Xiao narrowed his eyes. "You said you would entrust your back to me."

Cui Buqu's face was devoid of expression. "What I meant was that I would take over the Jiejian Bureau after your death. There's no need to thank me. Helping others is the foundation of happiness, and we've known each other for some time, after a—"

Barely a minute had passed and he was denying everything. Feng Xiao laughed in anger. Rather than waste time arguing, he took hold of Cui Buqu's chin and lowered his head, swallowing those unfinished words.

Chapter 150

THE RAIN WAS LIGHT, but the fine drizzle mingled with the dust on the wind and produced an uncomfortable stickiness. Cui Buqu's hair and clothes were damp, yet the gusting night wind only blew them halfway dry before he was soaked again. He'd rather have been thoroughly drenched by a torrential downpour—it would be better than the clammy feeling of damp hair and layers of clothing clinging together, heavy as iron, threatening to crush his spine and neck.

The ground was an amalgam of crushed stone and mud that made it uncomfortable to lie down. Though the pain in his shoulder had dulled from excruciating agony to a persistent ache, Cui Buqu still couldn't use one of his arms and had to rely solely on one elbow to try to lift himself. Every breath was greeted not by the fresh scent of rain mingling with damp earth or the sweet aroma of spilled wine from the tavern, but by the metallic tang of blood.

His burdened and broken body was weighed down by injuries yet to heal and freshly acquired wounds. He felt more than just pain coursing through his limbs. His old injuries had been aggravated and were screaming shrilly, as if invisible hands were dismantling him with dull knives.

But all his agonies paled in comparison to the sensation on his lips. Cui Buqu opened his eyes slightly and—momentarily—forgot to resist.

Why would Feng Xiao do such a thing at a time like this? They were seriously injured, and they weren't alone. Guan Shanhai was still out cold, but two pairs of eyes bored into them. Feng Xiao's two copies wore vacant expressions completely uncharacteristic of the man they were impersonating, frozen in place like twin pieces of wood.

When Cui Buqu caught sight of them from the corner of his eye, his injured bones ached even more.

But Feng Xiao paid them no heed, acting as if no one else was there. He pressed his lips harder against Cui Buqu's, displeased with his distraction. He wasn't content to stop after a taste. He insisted on banging

down the door and sampling everything within the master's house before he would be satisfied.

Cui Buqu's uninjured hand found Feng Xiao's shoulder and shoved. He was clearly not playing coy, but unfortunately, the seriously injured Feng Xiao remained as motionless as a firmly planted boulder. He tightened his grip on Cui Buqu's chin, drawing a faint moan of discomfort from the man beneath him.

Maybe, thought Cui Buqu, he should pretend to be unconscious. It was his usual tactic, after all.

Feng Xiao appeared to have seen through his plan. He threatened in a voice so low only Cui Buqu could hear it, "If you pretend to pass out, I swear I'll strip you naked in front of them."

Cui Buqu said nothing. He had no doubt Feng-er was capable of doing as he said, but even so, he refused to lose.

As he hesitated, Feng Xiao brazenly claimed his mouth, only leisurely drawing back when Cui Buqu's breathing became disordered and his cheeks flushed. Even then, the effects of Feng Xiao's scorching breath lingered. His usually cold and ashy lips were now vibrant red and swollen from the kiss. The Zuoyue chief had been forced to tilt his head to meet Feng Xiao's assault, and the corners of his eyes had reddened, though whether from the rain or their heated breaths it was impossible to say—he was seemingly angry, yet not truly so. Feng Xiao was close enough to see his expression clearly, and his heart swelled with pride knowing that others might not notice such details, but he did. Even the frustration of fighting Xiao Lü to a draw and watching him leave so calmly had faded significantly.

Ming Yue's jaw dropped; he didn't even notice the rain falling. He wondered if his injuries were more severe than he'd realized, resulting in qi deviation-induced hallucinations. Hastily, Ming Yue averted his gaze from the two entwined figures. Fighting through the pain, he struggled to turn his head to look at Qin Miaoyu, intending to call her over to help him. But Qin Miaoyu was even more stupefied than he was: She stared wide-eyed, unable to tear her gaze away.

Suspicious, Ming Yue looked back to find that Feng Xiao and Cui Buqu had already broken apart. Feng-er coughed a few times, then turned

his head and spat out a mouthful of black blood before grabbing Cui Buqu's arm to help him up from the ground.

They looked completely normal. So it really had been a hallucination. Ming Yue breathed a sigh of relief.

Qin Miaoyu leaned over and whispered, "So the Deputy Chief and Chief Cui are in that kind of relationship?"

"What kind of relationship?" Ming Yue asked in confusion. When he recalled what he'd just seen, all the hair on his body stood on end. His internal injuries throbbed anew.

"They're, you know—cut-sleeves." Qin Miaoyu's voice was very low. She was the least severely injured of them all. After the tavern, she hadn't participated in any of the subsequent battles. Now that she'd rested and recovered somewhat, she was the only one with the energy to follow up on these details.

Before Ming Yue could answer, Feng Xiao glanced over. His murderous aura still clung to him, and he'd yet to return to his playful, licentious self. Qin Miaoyu immediately fell silent. Not until he turned back around did she exhale and ask Ming Yue in a low voice, "Third Chief, will we still be fighting the Zuoyue Bureau for credit after this?"

Ming Yue's head spun, and his stomach churned as his internal injuries flared. He yearned to vomit up another mouthful of gore. Feng-er had always been brazen and dismissive of etiquette, but Ming Yue never thought he'd be this audacious.

You could have chosen anyone on earth, yet you had to fall for the chief of the Zuoyue Bureau.

Ming Yue had heard Cui Buqu was a prickly character, but this wasn't the source of his headache. It was the Zuoyue Bureau behind him, and the prospect of what the empress would think once she found out. Although the emperor and empress were themselves deeply in love, no emperor would be pleased to see his subordinates pairing off. It defeated the purpose of all the checks and balances he'd put in place.

This matter must remain a strict secret. Ming Yue, diligent and loyal as he was, had already begun contemplating their next step, his injury hurting more with every minute.

It was no ordinary internal injury. His last clash with Xiao Lü had exhausted all remnants of Ming Yue's qi, resulting in severe damage to his meridians and organs. Had Xiao Lü not been weakened from his battle with Feng Xiao, Ming Yue would surely have lost his life.

"Third Chief?" Qin Miaoyu had no idea what Ming Yue was thinking, only that he was staring vacantly ahead as if possessed by an evil spirit.

"No, I'm too tired. I need a nap before I deal with this," Ming Yue murmured. He closed his eyes and lay right back down in the muddy puddle, refusing to move.

Qin Miaoyu was bewildered. Should she help her superior up, or go back alone? She was tired too. If she helped Ming Yue walk the whole way back… But then again, if she returned without him, she would definitely face a reprimand.

She looked around and found a dry spot under the eaves to lie down, feeling perfectly at ease as she closed her eyes. She was also injured; she let herself lapse into unconsciousness.

Cui Buqu had gotten to his feet. Feng Xiao was supporting one of his arms, but in truth, he was the one bearing most of Feng Xiao's weight. If he didn't, Feng Xiao probably wouldn't make it back.

"Wasn't Deputy Chief Feng awfully majestic a moment ago?" Cui Buqu sneered, unsympathetic. "Why are you on death's door now?"

Feng Xiao sighed. "They say dying under peonies will make you an elegant ghost. But if I really die here, won't I waste all that fine sentiment about me being worth it?"

"If you die, I'll hang bright red lanterns at the Zuoyue Bureau for two weeks," Cui Buqu replied. "I'll set off firecrackers three times a day, and throw the most lavish celebration I can afford."

"Ququ, it's charming when a woman speaks insincerely, but when a man does, it's pretentious. You know I would never compare you to the mediocre masses, but is it really so difficult for you to admit even once that you don't want me to die?"

"Since you can run your mouth, you should be fine to walk."

Before Cui Buqu finished speaking, he let Feng Xiao go, completely merciless. Feng Xiao had used all his strength to speak and was caught off guard. He failed to catch himself and fell to the ground, splattering mud all over himself.

His internal organs burned like they were on fire. The moment his focus turned to his injuries, he couldn't utter so much as a word. Deputy Chief Feng, ever fastidious, a man who would change his clothes for even a tiny speck of dirt, had never been so wretched in his life.

As he slowly exhaled, he vaguely heard Cui Buqu's footsteps fading into the distance.

It seemed he really was angry.

But…this weather was freezing. Why hadn't Feng Xiao put on an extra layer before coming out? Just because he'd felt fine at the time? If he had, his teeth wouldn't be chattering now as the autumn winds and cold rain battered him.

Still, when he considered Xiao Lü likely wasn't faring any better, his heart was at peace. Even the disappointment of Cui Buqu abandoning him wasn't as pronounced.

The footsteps sounded again.

One step heavy, one step light, as if the person was injured on one side, making their movements unbalanced.

Feng Xiao's thoughts stuttered to a halt, and he forced his eyes open. Before he could get a clear look, a cloak stinking of blood fell over him. It was very thick, but half soaked. Feng Xiao frowned as a bamboo cane was stuffed into his right hand. Where in heaven's name had Cui Buqu found it?

"Whose cloak is this?" His voice was weak, but it didn't hide his distaste.

"The young leader of the Jinhuan Guild's," Cui Buqu said coolly. "You'd better support yourself a little. My shoulder's broken."

"I don't want a dead man's cloak." Feng Xiao's voice was still scornful, but now it held a hint of playful petulance.

Cui Buqu coughed a few times. As Feng Xiao struggled to sit up, Cui Buqu grabbed one of his arms and helped him. Pain shot through his own

broken bones, but though he stiffened momentarily, he didn’t make a sound.

Yet Feng Xiao seemed to notice. He drew a breath and steadied himself with the bamboo cane, relieving some of the weight on Cui Buqu. Even then, his voice dripped disdain. “Exchange cloaks with me. I’ll wear yours.”

Cui Buqu sneered. “Not a chance.”

The two of them struggled on, supporting each other as they awkwardly made their way back. Their pace was slow, for they had to spare some of their strength to bicker. Neither was willing to concede.

“Cui Buqu, with your sharp tongue and plain looks, if you keep this up, you’re sure to die alone.”

“Your lordship needn’t feel overly concerned.”

“How about I show some mercy and offer myself up as a living sacrifice? At least then you won’t bring calamity upon others.”

“Is Leng Du’s cloak warm?”

“It’s passable. Why? Are you thinking about trading with me now that you’re cold? Forget it.”

“I heard he has a strange habit. Before every battle, he must sleep with a beautiful woman. Perhaps the cloak you’re wearing now was laid under the lady. Who knows what evidence of their passion remains? There seems to be a reek coming from it.”

“Keep talking—I’ll vomit blood on you, and we can die together.”

At last, silence.

The rain stopped, and the autumn wind rolled in. Though heavy clouds covered the sky and the moon was absent, a faint, refreshing breeze swirled past.

The clear skies that had been gone for so long would finally return.

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Later, Cui Buqu sent the Zuoyue guard and Pei Jingzhe to fetch the others. A carriage comfortably transported Qin Miaoyu, Ming Yue, and Guan Shanhai back to the relay station.

Before Qin Miaoyu could celebrate her wise decision, however, a wave of heavy official duties poured in. She soon wished she could cry and fall into a coma from her wounds like Ming Yue had.

Xiao Lü's people had transported all the rice away, and not a single grain remained. Fortunately the flood had receded, and with the aid of Yang Yun's testimony, the several large households that had conspired with him were easily captured. Following Yang Yun's list, Cui Buqu rounded them all up and pressured them to hand over their stored grain for Pei Jingzhe to distribute to the citizens.

The large households immediately became evasive, unwilling to cough up what they'd swallowed. The Li family even boasted of their relationship with the Li clan of Longxi. It was common knowledge that the matriarch of Longxi's Li clan was Empress Dugu's older sister. Qin Miaoyu had only joined the Jiejian Bureau recently and found it difficult to navigate the intricate relationships between Central Plains families. She sought out Cui Buqu for advice.

When Qin Miaoyu arrived, Cui Buqu had been knocked unconscious by a bowl of hemp powder while the doctors set his bones. His thin lips were pressed tightly together and his brow was furrowed, as if the pain reached him even in his sleep.

Qiao Xian stood guard beside him. Qin Miaoyu cast her a quick glance. She'd heard Qiao Xian had knelt at Cui Buqu's door for most of the night after returning, and that Pei Jingzhe—that fool—had held an umbrella for her the entire time. Only when the sky began to pale with dawn did Cui Buqu summon her inside. Qin Miaoyu didn't know what they'd discussed, but Qiao Xian's relief afterward was palpable. Her face shone, radiant, as if she'd unshouldered years' worth of burdens. Pei Jingzhe, fool that he was, couldn't take his eyes off her.

Qin Miaoyu silently sighed at the incompetence of her Jiejian Bureau colleagues.

Noticing her gaze, Qiao Xian looked up, her eyes flashing with coldness and hostility. Qin Miaoyu was taken aback until she remembered

she'd been busy all night while Feng Xiao and Ming Yue were both injured and recuperating. She hadn't removed her makeup, so she was still wearing Feng Xiao's face.

In that case, she thought wickedly, couldn't she use Deputy Chief Feng's identity to play a trick or two and let him take the blame once he woke?

Perhaps she was tired of living.

Cui Buqu opened his eyes in a daze. The pain made him slow to react; he stared at the curtain above his head in silence for a full quarter hour before slowly turning toward Qiao Xian and Qin Miaoyu.

"Lord Chief," Qiao Xian said softly, "the doctor visited earlier and left a prescription. The medicine has been prepared. Would you like a bowl?"

What did she mean, *Would you like a bowl?* She was talking about taking medicine like drinking soup. Qin Miaoyu considered for a moment. Then she playfully imitated Feng Xiao's voice and tone. "I have candy here."

As if by magic, she produced a small jar, opening the lid to release the sweet smell of malt sugar.

Cui Buqu took the jar and looked at her. "Qin Miaoyu, do you have nothing better to do?"

Qin Miaoyu choked. She'd thought her performance flawless, yet this man had seen right through her.

"The lord chief is wise." The clever Qin Miaoyu laughed awkwardly, no longer pretending. Before Feng Xiao had gone into seclusion to recover, he'd instructed her to follow Cui Buqu's commands. Cui Buqu had shown no mercy ordering her around, driving her like a dog and sending her all over the county.

"I've gathered up the refugees as you asked. It's just as your lordship predicted: They refuse to camp outside the city."

"They've been imprisoned for many days," said Cui Buqu coolly. "Of course they no longer trust the government. To them, leaving the city is no different than waiting for death. Only remaining offers a glimmer of hope."

His voice was hoarse and slow, but very steady. Qin Miaoyu patiently waited for him to finish, then nodded. “It’s just as you say. I let them take temporary shelter in the county office. It’s vacant after Huang Lüe’s death, and I set some constables there to keep watch. For now, things are under control. The trouble is, there’s no grain left. The wealthy households aren’t willing to provide any; they claim it’s the government’s responsibility to aid the refugees, and that it goes against all reason to tell them to give their own food away. The Ding and Li families are most adamant, and they have relatives at court. This subordinate isn’t sure what we ought to do. I must trouble your lordship for advice.”

Chapter 151

WHEN QIAO XIAN brought in the medicine, Cui Buqu regarded the bowl with disgust, his expression more hateful than when he'd looked upon Xiao Lü. He had no good opinion of those landlords—they were the type who wouldn't weep until they saw the coffins.

"If they refuse to cooperate, kill them."

Qin Miaoyu was stunned. "All of them?"

She could tell he wasn't joking. Qin Miaoyu was no bleeding heart, but these wealthy families were part of a complicated web of relationships within Guangqian County. Since the mastermind Yang Yun was a relative of the emperor, it was possible his collaborators might also have connections at court. It was easy to say *kill them*, but if someone went after the Jiejian Bureau for it later, then she, a simple spy, couldn't bear the responsibility.

Feng Xiao was in seclusion, and Ming Yue was in a coma. Everyone with decision-making power was absent. Someone of her low rank had no authority to dictate the Jiejian Bureau's actions.

Cui Buqu fell silent. He too realized it was inappropriate to leave this to Qin Miaoyu. After all, she wasn't the head of the Jiejian Bureau. Currently, only Cui Buqu had the rank and status to act.

"After a disaster like this, plague is bound to follow. Gather all the doctors and recruit the largest pharmacy in the city. Have them prescribe some preventative medication for the refugees and order mugwort burned around the city to dispel disease. Yang Yun left us plenty of gold and silver; deduct the expenses from that first. Keep a record. Rong Qing has already reported this matter to the court—when he returns to the capital, he can present the record along with his list of Yang Yun's crimes."

He thought a moment. "After that, go to the villa and find a few corpses. Fresh ones—the more gruesome their deaths, the better. It's fine if their faces are damaged. Just choose ones that will scare people with a single glance and give them nightmares if they look again."

Qin Miaoyu looked at him strangely. She'd likely never heard such a bizarre request, but she quickly recovered. "Quite a few of our enemies died at Fengyun Tavern. We can bring them here; that will save us from having to search."

Cui Buqu nodded. "That's fine."

"Lord Chief," Qiao Xian reminded him. "It's time for your medicine."

The two engaged in a silent standoff, which ended when Cui Buqu picked up the bowl.

Qin Miaoyu quickly left to carry out Cui Buqu's orders, leaving Qiao Xian and Cui Buqu alone.

After hesitating for a long moment, Qiao Xian silently knelt.

Cui Buqu seemed unsurprised. "Have you thought it over?"

Qiao Xian lowered her head. "Yes. As long as I can stay in the Zuoyue Bureau, this subordinate will remain at your lordship's beck and call. I'm yours to command, always."

They'd had a long talk earlier that day, in which Cui Buqu had offered her two choices. One was to leave the Zuoyue Bureau forever. The other was to stay—but not with him. The Zuoyue Bureau had hidden sentry posts all across the land; Qiao Xian would be stationed at one of those and start over. Only after proving herself would she have a chance to be promoted.

The latter path was naturally much more difficult. Qiao Xian had been with Cui Buqu since the establishment of the Zuoyue Bureau and was currently a seventh-rank official. This demotion effectively returned her to the bottom to start again from scratch.

"I thought you'd choose to leave behind your official position and be free," Cui Buqu commented. "It wouldn't be such a bad thing."

"I want to stay," Qiao Xian insisted. "Whatever it takes."

The Qingcang Sect from which Qiao Xian hailed was small, with mediocre teachings and no secrets worth stealing. Their only skill of note was the art of disguise, but even this wasn't particularly impressive: In the face of raw martial power, disguises counted for little. Consequently, the

sect had few disciples. Hoping to revitalize it, the new sect leader had married the only daughter of the leader of a large sect from the southeast. She was an arrogant woman, pampered since childhood, and after marrying in she wasted no time ordering everyone about and meddling wherever she could. Qiao Xian's beauty inevitably drew her ire, and ultimately resulted in her expulsion from the sect.

Exiled and with nowhere to go, Qiao Xian received instructions from the Thirteen Floors of Yunhai that sent her to Chang'an, the capital of the former Zhou dynasty. Per her orders, Qiao Xian waited at a teahouse on the outskirts of Chang'an for half a month, exhausting all her remaining money and facing numerous mishaps due to her lovely face. She was left utterly miserable. She had gradually broken away from her small sect's mindset and realized there was a larger world out there. Perhaps the Thirteen Floors of Yunhai had hung her out to dry so she could experience the warmth and coldness of the world, that she might be convinced to submit to them fully.

But she never encountered any messenger from the Thirteen Floors. Instead, she met Cui Buqu.

Cui Buqu hadn't yet been put in charge of the Zuoyue Bureau then, though Lady Dugu already trusted him deeply, and he was a guest in the Duke of Sui's residence. Few people knew of him; Qiao Xian had never heard his name. Later, when Cui Buqu learned of her origins and asked her if she wished to come along with him, she'd vaguely realized that her value to the Thirteen Floors might lie herein.

She came from a small sect and had no skills except the art of disguise. Cui Buqu found people to teach her medical science and some ancient texts on disguises for her to learn from. After the Zuoyue Bureau was founded, he took her with him as they traveled the world handling cases.

Not only did Qiao Xian benefit from receiving Cui Buqu's direct teachings, she felt needed by the Zuoyue Bureau—and by Cui Buqu himself. She thought that she'd found her place, and was far more at home than she'd ever been in her original sect. Only in the Zuoyue Bureau did she feel her heart was beating and alive, that there would always be goals for her to accomplish and someone she could look to for guidance.

Later, she was threatened by a messenger from the Thirteen Floors. Qiao Xian was forced to choose between two options: exposing her identity and being cast out of the Zuoyue Bureau, or delivering irrelevant messages that wouldn't endanger Cui Buqu. One misstep led to another, and by the time she tried to turn back, she found her path had already changed beyond recognition.

She went to Zhao's Teahouse determined to die, but unexpectedly, Cui Buqu had left her a path to life.

"Your body needs long-term care. Refining the ice-fungus pill requires time and labor, and there are few left. I'll refine a bottle for your lordship before I leave and write down the prescription. The old doctor at Huize Hall knows the method; you can ask him to refine it for you."

Neither her words nor her reluctant actions softened Cui Buqu's resolve to send her from his side. Everyone must pay a price for their actions; regardless of the hardships they might have suffered, they should be prepared to bear the consequences of their decisions. Since Qiao Xian had chosen to stay, she had accepted her punishment.

In any event, leaving the capital for a secret post might not be the misfortune she thought.

Cui Buqu grunted. As the medicine gradually took effect, his head began to swim. He'd wanted to wait for news from Qin Miaoyu before lying down, but his body was warning him he had reached his limits: All the willpower in the world couldn't counteract his fatigue. Qiao Xian's words grew foggy and confused, as if he heard them through a paper window screen.

Even his sleep was restless. Countless dreams came one after another, whirling through his mind like a revolving lantern. The dead—former enemies, many of whom Cui Buqu had killed or plotted against—crawled up from the underworld, loathing and resentment wrapped like spider silk around Cui Buqu's body. They screamed for revenge, demanding his life, but Cui Buqu had a will of iron and a heart of stone: Even in his dream, he remained impassive as he allowed the evil spirits to spiral around him and howl.

He felt as if a massive boulder was tied to his body, dragging him down to the bottom of a deep pool. Cries echoed in his ears, as if trying to

call him back, but the nameless force below was too strong. He flattened his hand into a blade and sliced through the silk, strand by strand, but his consciousness was adrift in the sea of his dreamscape, unable to find solid ground.

He had no idea how much time had passed when the voices in his ears gradually sharpened and became clear. Qiao Xian was talking, answered by another familiar voice. Cui Buqu's reflexes were sluggish in the dream. Cui Buqu frowned and pondered for a long time before realizing the other voice must belong to Pei Jingzhe.

The two of them spoke fast and low. It didn't sound like an idle chat—their voices were tight with unconcealed anxiety. He seemed to hear the words *my lord* and *Deputy Chief Feng*.

Suddenly he heard a short, shrill scream. Cui Buqu opened his eyes.

His heart ached dully at being forced awake, as if tugged by an invisible thread. He felt pain shoot up his injured shoulder.

The scream hadn't come from Pei Jingzhe or Qiao Xian, but from the neighboring courtyard—it was the terrified scream of a young woman. Pei Jingzhe rushed over to take a look. Qiao Xian was about to follow when she glanced back and saw Cui Buqu with his eyes open. She stopped in her tracks and hurried back to help him sit up.

"What happened?" Cui Buqu had woken too abruptly, and his mind was still slow.

"Deputy Chief Feng is in seclusion to heal his wounds. Something seems to have gone wrong," Qiao Xian said.

Pei Jingzhe had arranged for maidservants to deliver food and water daily to Feng Xiao's quarters, ensuring he would have what he needed upon waking. But while Cui Buqu had been sleeping during the day, a maid had encountered Feng Xiao, who was supposed to be in seclusion behind closed doors. He'd struck and injured her, and it'd taken the combined efforts of Pei Jingzhe, Qin Miaoyu, and the freshly awakened Ming Yue to subdue him. The incident had triggered a qi deviation in Feng Xiao, and he'd fallen into a coma.

Cui Buqu's vacant gaze gradually gained focus. "Just now, I thought I heard you talking about the ice-fungus pill. What does the pill have to do

with this?”

Qiao Xian instinctively shook her head. “Nothing. Your lordship misheard.”

Cui Buqu stared at her in silence, and Qiao Xian stared back.

***

Pei Jingzhe knew there was an enormous gap between his own martial skills and Feng Xiao’s, but he’d never before felt it so clearly. A hand was squeezing his neck, its grip growing tighter and tighter. Breathing became impossible; at this rate, he’d be meeting the ruler of the underworld any minute.

“My…lord,” Pei Jingzhe forced between gritted teeth.

Feng Xiao seemed not to hear. His hair was disheveled, and a red mark ran vertically between his brows—a sign that his qi was blocked at the Yintang point, and his mind was greatly affected.

After absorbing the two sarira, his internal strength had increased by leaps and bounds, but his progress had come with a latent danger. Taking shortcuts would always lead to disaster. Feng Xiao hadn’t entered qi deviation when fighting Xiao Lü, but that was only due to his extraordinary willpower. Sooner or later, this moment was bound to come.

In desperation, Pei Jingzhe raised his palm and struck at Feng Xiao. The blow was instantly deflected; Pei Jingzhe spasmed as his own internal energy rebounded back on him. Deputy Chief Feng’s martial skills were no weaker when in qi deviation. On the contrary, his temporary loss of lucidity meant no one could restrain him.

Pei Jingzhe could have cried. He deeply regretted not being harsher on Feng Xiao when he’d subdued him the first time with Ming Yue and the others. Who could have imagined his lord would break free of his confinement so quickly? Now, he might not last long enough for the third chief to arrive—by the time he did, Pei Jingzhe would be dead and buried.

Wouldn’t his lord be sad to realize he’d killed Pei Jingzhe with his own two hands?

“It’s… It’s me, Jingzhe!” Pei Jingzhe choked out, trying to buy himself time and a chance of survival. He needed Feng Xiao to wake up.

The words had no effect. Feng Xiao wasn’t in a mindless rage where he was killing people with every strike, but his consciousness was turned inward, lost and chaotic. He was completely oblivious to the outside world.

Pei Jingzhe’s eyes welled with tears. At the edge of his vision, he caught movement—Ming Yue, Cui Buqu, and the others had arrived. It was as if a savior from heaven had descended. His eyes lit up.

“Erlang!”

“Feng-er!”

They were familiar voices.

At that moment, Feng Xiao was like an untethered soul. The voices floated in from a distance and entered his ears, but his soul was caught in a tug-of-war with the sarira of the grandmaster it had formed from. His qi was roiling, seeking an exit it couldn’t find; he could spare them no attention. All he could do was allow his body to follow its instincts and fight.

The voices grew slower and closer. Only then did they start to register.

Ming Yue?

And that Cui fellow.

Feng Xiao sighed and looked at the faint apparition in front of him.

Not far away, a tall man with a beard and mustache stood opposite him, his hands behind his back. His face oozed arrogance, as if nothing in the world was worthy of his attention. The owner of the two sarira: Cui Youwang, former grandmaster of the demonic sects.

I knew it, Feng Xiao thought. *How could Xiao Lü be so generous as to give the sarira away for nothing? He was waiting for this.*

Such treasures were not meant to be possessed by ordinary people. If Feng Xiao hadn’t come from a demonic sect and trained in their martial arts, he’d be facing more than just qi deviation right now—his body might have exploded, killing him instantly.

Pei Jingzhe had no idea what drastic transformations Feng Xiao was experiencing within. He only knew that the hand gripping his throat relaxed minutely at the sound of Cui Buqu's voice.

Ming Yue seized the opportunity to step forward and seal Feng Xiao's acupoints. With the help of Qin Miaoyu, he supported Feng Xiao's feverish body as he collapsed again.

Pei Jingzhe had faithfully served at Feng Xiao's side for so long, yet he couldn't compare to this man who'd known him less than a year. The thought made him deeply unhappy. Before he could dwell on it, he heard Ming Yue say gravely, "We can't let this go on. We must find a supply of ice fungus. It's the only thing that can help Erlang through his crisis."

"The deputy chief is suffering from qi deviation," Qin Miaoyu said, puzzled. "What good is medicine? Shouldn't we work together to channel him qi?"

Ming Yue smiled bitterly. "Absolutely not. He doesn't lack qi right now; his qi is about to explode. He can't rely on anyone but himself to regulate his meridians. The ice fungus can't change his situation, but it can help."

Qin Miaoyu sighed, her brow creasing. "That may be more difficult than you think. I checked at every pharmacy in the city earlier. Either they haven't heard of it, or their knowledge is half-complete, and they just say it's hard to find. Only the major pharmacies in the capital stock it. We'll never get it in time."

"You don't have to go to the capital," said Cui Buqu. "I have some right here."

Qiao Xian's eyes widened in alarm. Before she could object, Cui Buqu pulled out a porcelain bottle. He poured out the last three pills, pried open Feng Xiao's mouth, and stuffed them inside, then closed his jaw and forced him to swallow.

Chapter 152

FENG XIAO PAID no mind to the outside world. He was locked in a vicious battle, one no less dangerous than the fight in the tavern.

Cui Youwang's two sarira seemed to harbor all the pridefulness of their former master, refusing to be absorbed or assimilated. After lying dormant for several weeks and feigning submission, they'd finally taken the opportunity to launch a counterattack while Feng Xiao was heavily injured.

It was exactly what one would expect from a member of the demonic sects.

Fortunately, Feng Xiao had been wise enough to guess Xiao Lü wouldn't give such precious sarira away without a catch. He'd kept a portion of his guard up all this time; otherwise, he'd have already been embroiled with the invader and ultimately destroyed himself.

For the mighty deputy chief of the Jiejian Bureau, leader of the Fajing Sect, to die from a qi deviation…it was only slightly better than choking to death on his dinner. He'd become a famous laughingstock in jianghu history. What's more, Feng Xiao was elegant, peerless, radiant, dazzling, show-stealing, unique—if he died like this, wouldn't the world suffer a terrible loss, deprived of such a priceless treasure?

"Hmph!" An expression of pure contempt, neither pleased nor angry. It resembled the mighty drums of the thunder beast's hide made by the Yellow Emperor himself, resounding for thousands of miles.

When this sound reached Feng Xiao's ears, he felt his foggy mind quake, his already-chaotic qi disrupted further. Feng Xiao looked at the wavering shadow in front of him.

It wasn't the former grandmaster Cui Youwang in truth. It was only his echo, which Feng Xiao's mind had conjured up thanks to the sarira. Yet in another sense, it was the last trace of Cui Youwang left in the realm of the living. Like a fish that had been killed, then served at the table, Feng Xiao thought maliciously. Steamed, braised in vinegar, or fried—one

couldn’t say it was gone, but it’d turned from a living creature into someone else’s meal.

The demonic sects believed in the survival of the fittest; they seldom honored their predecessors. The only thing they worshipped was strength. But Feng Xiao was not a native disciple of the demonic sects. Even his position as leader of the Fajing Sect was one he’d reluctantly accepted and haphazardly managed. He was much more enthusiastic about his role in the Jiejian Bureau.

Since childhood, he had been gifted and favored; everything he desired was within reach. He’d breezed through martial training others bled for—but because of this, he was comparatively less fixated on it. Had he put his full focus into this path, with his talent, he’d have had far more achievements than he already did. As a consequence, this leader of the Fajing Sect respected the demonic sects’ preceding grandmasters even less than usual. Standing on the brink of life and death, he still spared a moment to ridicule them.

Met with this frivolous attitude, Cui Youwang didn’t say a word—he sneered and struck.

He surged forward with overwhelming force, catching Feng Xiao off-guard. Killing intent choked the air, winding around Feng Xiao strand by strand like the silk of a cocoon, tight and impenetrable. Cui Youwang captured every stream of qi Feng Xiao unleashed before it could have any effect; he had a counter to every attack. He started slow, then turned ferocious.

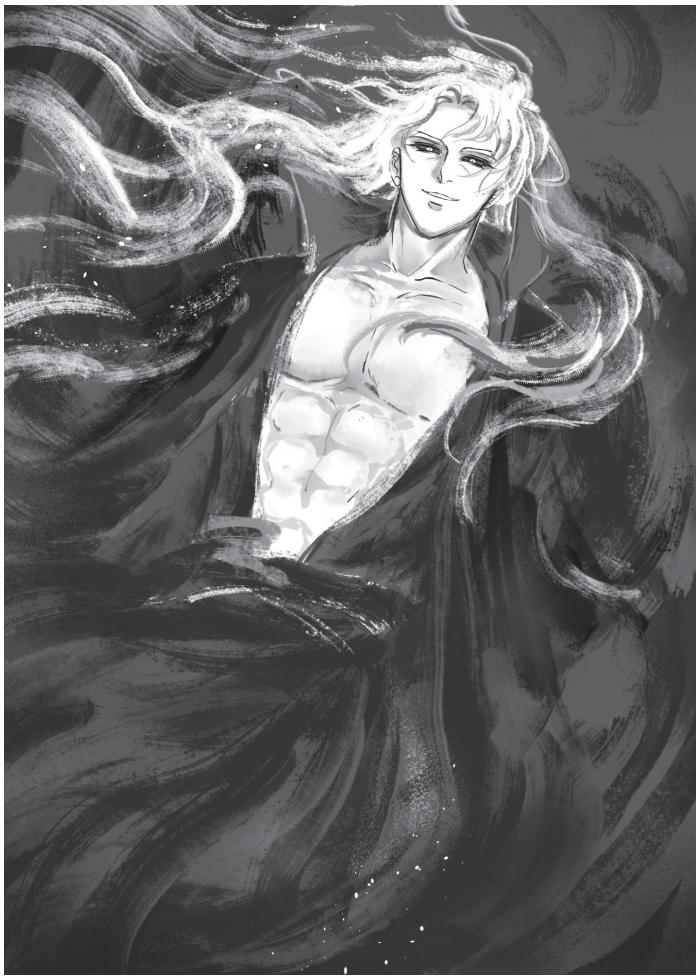
Feng Xiao’s mind, his last line of defense, was swept away by the intensity of the attack. His consciousness flickered, his body no longer under his control.

“You dare to call yourself a successor to the demonic sects with only this level of ability?” A rough voice echoed in Feng Xiao’s ear, startling him. He instinctively moved to counterattack but found himself unable to harness his qi, as if an unseen force was pinning him down. Only now did he realize he’d underestimated his predecessor. Anyone capable of leaving such a glorious mark on the demonic sects’ legacy couldn’t be any less talented than himself.

The consequence of his carelessness might very well be his life. Feng Xiao finally didn’t dare fool around anymore.

But he was terribly weary. After the battle at Fengyun Tavern in which he’d killed nearly a dozen experts, both renowned and newcomers alike, he’d fought Xiao Lü, who was practically his equal in strength. He’d exhausted all his energy and struggled just to hobble back. He was beyond fatigued. Yet now he was denied rest even when healing, forced to fight *another* match?

Feng Xiao sorted and gathered the many streams of qi, then mobilized them to fight back against the phantom of Cui Youwang trying to engulf him. But his foe had lain in ambush for many days and was well-prepared. As they clashed, Feng Xiao’s qi was instantly weakened by a third while his foe remained as solid and unmoved as Mount Tai. He cast Feng Xiao a mocking glance.



“Trash!” he heard Cui Youwang say. “In life, I fought the six most powerful grandmasters in the world. I defeated them with ease and walked away unscathed. The demonic sects grow weaker with every generation. If an incompetent like you had shown up when I was still around, forget entering the Riyue Sect. I’d have struck you dead at the mountain gates!”

Feng Xiao gasped for breath as his opponent’s overwhelming qi poured down on his head, creating a pressure so immense his own qi nearly buckled. He felt he was about to collapse into dust and fragments. Within the illusory realm of his consciousness, he staggered back several steps. His limbs felt leaden, as if they were tied to heavy boulders. He was unable to raise so much as a finger.

Opposite him, Cui Youwang laughed again, cold and mocking. “I advise you to give up now.”

“Did the six grandmasters attack you all at once, or separately?” Feng Xiao asked.

It was a strange experience. The figure that stood before Feng Xiao appeared to be Cui Youwang, but in fact, it was the two sarira he’d left behind—condensed remnants of his life’s martial arts and the lingering fragments of his consciousness. Thanks to this, two people who should never have met in life shared an encounter that transcended time and space.

Cui Youwang snorted coldly. “Of course it was all at once!”

“Then you’re lying. Even if you were the strongest martial artist back then, it’s impossible for you to handle six martial arts grandmasters at the same time!”

“Fool!” Cui Youwang shouted. “Do you think the strongest of my era were comparable to the half-hearted masters you’re producing now?! If my venerable self wishes to kill you, I can do it as easily as crushing an ant!”

“Then go ahead!” Feng Xiao appeared unconcerned. “Don’t hold back. Who knows, maybe you’ll seize my body like one of those deities and reincarnate as a human?”

“I left behind two sarira. How do you know I can’t?” Cui Youwang asked darkly.

Feng Xiao laughed. “Because that’s why you’re hesitating! Destroy me, and you’ll destroy yourself too—and you can’t bear to do that. After all these years, though you’re just a sarira, you still possess some of the consciousness Cui Youwang left behind. You’ve finally found someone to spar and talk with. How can you bear to destroy me?!”

The figure trembled slightly, as if Feng Xiao had struck a nerve, and now it was reconsidering.

Feng Xiao would never let go of a chance to destroy an enemy. Even if the man in front of him was a legendary master from his own sect, he didn’t hesitate to launch a counterattack.

“Sir!” Pei Jingzhe looked on in horror as Feng Xiao’s body shuddered, blood trickling from his mouth and nose.

Feng Xiao’s eyes were squeezed shut. He couldn’t hear Pei Jingzhe’s shouts. His complexion, which had been a pallid green, now began to turn faintly yellow, embodying that classic simile used to describe the dead: *a face like gold leaf.* Gold was a beautiful color, but if a martial arts practitioner showed such a complexion, death was nigh.

After swallowing the three ice-fungus pills, Feng Xiao’s color had improved slightly. But just when everyone thought his condition was improving, it took a sudden turn for the worse.

Ming Yue had said Feng Xiao was fighting desperately against his inner demons. There were only two possible outcomes of such a battle: If he succeeded, he’d live. If he failed, he’d die.

Cui Buqu stood quietly for a moment before turning to leave, prepared to deal with his own pressing business. Had he not given Feng Xiao his own emergency pills—and had Qiao Xian’s expression not been so grave—Pei Jingzhe might have thought Cui Buqu didn’t care a whit if Feng Xiao died. That maybe he was even secretly glad.

Today, the proud and infallible Deputy Chief Feng might truly falter.

Pei Jingzhe sighed to himself. In his eyes, Feng Xiao was practically omnipotent. He refused to entertain such a possibility.

He didn’t dare touch Feng Xiao. His skin burned like fire, and the slightest contact could lead to unexpected consequences. “If your lordship

wakes up, we can discuss docking my pay again," Pei Jingzhe said through gritted teeth, his heart aching. He thought for a while and added silently, *Doesn't your lordship love making things difficult for Cui-xiansheng? If something happens to you, the court will send someone else to manage the Jiejian Bureau, and Cui-xiansheng will quickly forget his old rival.*

He didn't know if any of his words would touch Feng Xiao's heart.

The two streams of qi within Feng Xiao were entwined in a life-or-death showdown, locked in a stalemate. Cui Youwang's qi swept toward Feng Xiao like a cresting wave, yet Feng Xiao blocked it before it could break. Feng Xiao wasn't merely defending; he sought any opportunity to counterattack, cunningly waiting to strike.

Cui Youwang was furious. "You rat—you don't deserve to call yourself a member of the demonic sects!"

"Do you really fancy yourself Cui Youwang?" Feng Xiao asked. "You're just two sarira he left behind after the death of his body and soul when he failed in his climb to the martial summit. Even if the real Cui Youwang stood before me, I'd still tell him—"

In the depths of Feng Xiao's mind, it was perfectly clear to him that this so-called Cui Youwang was just a phantom created by the qi deviation. Maybe the phantom really had inherited Cui Youwang's qi, but ultimately, it was an outside invader incompatible with Feng Xiao's martial arts. If he couldn't force this qi into submission and make it his own, what awaited him was a fate identical to Cui Youwang's.

This was likely the most dangerous challenge he'd faced in his martial training, but Feng Xiao had always grown stronger with each challenge he met. He had never known compromise or surrender. Maybe there was someone out there who could force him to concede, but it certainly wouldn't be here or now.

"—that there's always a higher sky—and always a better man!"

With these bold words, Feng Xiao surged forward and hemmed Cui Youwang in from the front and rear. After biding his time and regulating his breathing, he was officially ready to declare war on the enemy.

Cui Youwang roared with rage. He too fought without hesitation.

A violent tremor went through Feng Xiao as a dazzling light erupted before him. He felt as if his whole body was burning, his blood boiling, yearning to burst the confines of his skin and explode outward. His veins twisted and turned, washing him in waves of agony like the tossing sea.

After an indeterminate amount of time, the pain and turmoil finally subsided. Feng Xiao slowly opened his eyes.

Cui Youwang had vanished; the phantom was nowhere to be found. Feng Xiao's body felt warm and languid both inside and out. It was the feeling of defeating his enemy, so wonderful his muscles, bones, blood, and flesh groaned in comfort. Before him was a stretch of luxuriant green, like a field of newly planted seedlings, a swaying bamboo grove, or a pond layered in lotus leaves, gently soothing away his fatigue after the fierce battle.

A figure stood in the middle of the dense green, smiling at him.

Feng Xiao twitched his fingers, and the man came to him. His sickly face was familiar. He met Feng Xiao's eyes but said nothing, letting Feng Xiao's fingers brush over his face and open his collar, revealing skin that'd spent years away from the sun.

Cui Buqu touched Feng Xiao's wrist and sighed softly. "Xiao Lü is dead."

Feng Xiao was momentarily stunned. "How did he die?"

"He was seriously injured after your battle," Cui Buqu said. "Ming Yue led his people in pursuit and killed him."

"So the bandit leader has met his end, and the Thirteen Floors are a headless dragon," Feng Xiao said in relief. "They won't make trouble for us again."

Cui Buqu smiled faintly. "And it's all thanks to you. Of course I'll request the emperor recognize your accomplishments."

Feng Xiao also smiled. "You don't need to make any request. I just want you to do one thing."

He lifted Cui Buqu's chin, and a soft flush rose on that pale cheek. Cui Buqu seemed to want to step back, but unusually, he stayed put with a

look of forbearance that was very fetching. Feng Xiao dipped his head to kiss him, then paused.

Cui Buqu looked up at him, bewildered.

Feng Xiao sneered. “So you can even peek at my inner demons and confuse me. Not bad!”

His fingers curled, mercilessly closing around Cui Buqu’s throat. He squeezed, and in an instant, Cui Buqu crumbled to dust.

“How…did you realize…” His enemy’s voice drifted into his ears, faint and tinged with grudging defeat.

Feng Xiao laughed. “All you can conjure is the Cui Buqu in my fantasies! The real Cui Buqu would never say it was all thanks to me.”

Throughout this duel of both wits and strength, he’d begun to understand the rules of this dreamscape and fashioned an additional fantasy in a corner of his mind. Sure enough, the snake had emerged from its lair and fallen into his trap.

It felt as if a dust-covered table had been wiped clean—his soul was again pure and bright. His roiling qi slowly calmed, then quietly began to gather once more.

Great sounds come in whispers; great forms possess no shape.[6]

Feng Xiao discovered that, by chance, his martial arts seemed to have advanced yet again.

“Cui Youwang, you’ve lost!”

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Every seat in the guest hall of the governor’s residence was filled, yet the silence was deafening. Almost all the prominent households in the county had received an invitation they couldn’t refuse.

When Rong Qing’s missive had arrived at the Li family residence, the patriarch had begged illness and sent an unfavored son out to deal with it. He hadn’t expected the guards who came knocking to drag him, ill or not, from his bed and bring him here.

The Li family was only the start. The Ding, Zhao, Wang, and others had undergone the same treatment.

Everyone sat in silence, resolute in their strategy of passive resistance. No matter what Rong Qing said, they refused to speak. After all, the main culprits behind the embezzlement were Yang Yun, Li Yan, and Wu Yi, and they'd already been arrested. The families here had only assisted them under duress, and Cui Buqu had said those who had merely followed orders would be forgiven. Rong Qing wouldn't dare put any of the prominent families in the county to death for this.

Rong Qing had taken the time to have a word with them before Cui Buqu arrived. After all, soft words and courtesy should come first, reproof and punishment later. He tried appealing to reason and sentiment. He explained that the imperial granaries had no more grain to send. That if the victims grew desperate and violent, the first people they'd turn on would be the families present. That this was a matter that concerned everyone's safety. He pleaded for them to keep the bigger picture in mind.

He spoke so earnestly for so long that he felt as though his throat was smoking when he finished. But those stubborn old tortoises refused to budge. They hid like quails in the grass, not a one of them willing to step forward. Rong Qing was livid with fury.

At last even he ran out of patience. He slammed a hand on the table and instructed Pei Jingzhe to read from the account book Li Yan had provided. Which family had benefited most from the tax-exemption policy? Everything was recorded in black and white; no one could avoid their responsibilities. If they continued to stall, fine—Rong Qing had all day.

The patriarch of the Li family was first to speak. "Censor Rong is an intelligent man. Governor Yang made many grand promises when the tax-exemption policy was introduced, but in practice, we received only a fraction more grain compared to previous years. After the flood this year, the grain was entirely depleted. We're all going hungry. Where are we supposed to find the extra grain to feed the refugees? If your lordship doesn't believe us, take someone and conduct a search."

Obviously he wasn't afraid of what Rong Qing might find. If Rong Qing's search turned up empty, these same people would use their connections in court to file a complaint against him for abusing his position.

Rong Qing had seen the tragic state of the refugees after the flood, and he now hated these people even more. He yearned to send someone to turn all their manors upside down.

It was then that Cui Buqu arrived.

He came without fanfare, and without anyone to accompany him. He held a small handwarmer, and his cloak was wrapped tight around him as he walked soundlessly through the courtyard to reach the gates. He coughed a few times, which brought some color to his cheeks, pallid from the cold.

With the exception of Rong Qing and Pei Jingzhe, everyone's faces went rigid, as if they'd spotted a great enemy. Some of the young men glanced at him furtively.

The Zuoyue Bureau chief didn't return their glances. He looked straight ahead as he walked to the seat of honor and settled himself, his brow etched with weariness and his thin lips pale. From the side they appeared to curl slightly upward in something like a smile, yet not. As if, at any moment, he might make someone suffer until they wished for death.

The patriarch of the Li family felt an inexplicable chill run down his spine. He shut his mouth with a snap and resumed his quail act.

But Cui Buqu didn't ask him any questions. Instead, he said, "Before we begin, please invite Governor Yang over. I'd like to have a talk with him."

THE STORY CONCLUDES IN
Peerless
VOLUME 5

APPENDIX

Character & Name Guide

Character & Name Guide

HISTORICAL PERIOD

Peerless is set in the first era of the Sui dynasty, Kaihuang. Emperor Wen of Sui (given name Yang Jian) established his dynasty in 581 AD after usurping the throne from the previous Zhou dynasty. Though Sui was a short-lived dynasty that eventually fell apart in the hands of his son, Emperor Yang, Emperor Wen is viewed as one of the most influential emperors of ancient China, both for his prosperous rule and for the reunification of the Central Plains after over two hundred years of war and turmoil.

CHARACTERS

FENG XIAO 凤霄 (“HIGH HEAVENS”): Deputy Chief of the Jiejian Bureau. Courtesy name Yuntian.

CUI BUQU 崔不去 (“I WON’T GO”): Chief of the Zuoyue Bureau.

JIEJIAN BUREAU

PEI JINGZHE 裴惊蛰: Feng Xiao’s beleaguered assistant at the Jiejian Bureau.

MING YUE 明月: Third chief of the Jiejian Bureau.

ZUOYUE BUREAU

QIAO XIAN 乔仙: Member of the Zuoyue Bureau.

ZHANGSUN BODHI 长孙菩提: Deputy Chief of the Zuoyue Bureau.

SUI IMPERIAL COURT

YANG JIAN 杨坚: Emperor Wen of Sui, the first emperor of the Sui dynasty.

DUGU QIELUO 独孤伽罗: Empress Wenxian.

YANG YONG 杨勇: The crown prince and eldest son of Yang Jian and Empress Dugu.

YANG GUANG 杨广: The Prince of Jin and second son of Yang Jian and Empress Dugu.

YANG LIHUA 杨丽华: Princess Leping, Yang Jian and Empress Dugu's eldest daughter and the former empress of the previous Zhou dynasty.

YANG A-WU 杨阿五: Princess Lanling, Yang Jian and Empress Dugu's daughter.

YUWEN EYING 宇文娥英: The daughter of Yang Lihua and the emperor of the previous dynasty, Yuwen Yun.

GUAN SHANHAI 关山海: A martial official, assigned by Empress Dugu to Cui Buqu.

RONG QING 容卿: An imperial censor assigned to oversee Guangqian County's disaster relief efforts.

THIRTEEN FLOORS OF YUNHAI

XIAO LÜ 萧履: The pavilion leader of the Thirteen Floors.

FAN YUN 范耘: Second in rank among the directors of the Thirteen Floors. Cui Buqu's teacher.

YUXIU 玉秀: Third in rank among the directors of the Thirteen Floors. A monk who was once the trusted consultant of Yang Guang, the Prince of Jin.

YUAN SANSI 元三思: Fourth in rank among the directors of the Thirteen Floors. The governor of Boling Commandery and a childhood friend of Cui Buqu's mother.

LIN YONG 林雍: Seventh in rank among the directors of the Thirteen Floors. The young estate master of Yandang Mountain Estate.

FENG XIAOLIAN 冯小怜: Thirteenth in rank among the directors of the Thirteen Floors. A famous beauty.

GUANGQIAN COMMANDERY

YANG YUN 杨云: Governor of Guangqian Commandery and Yang Jian's nephew.

HUANG LÜE 黃略: Magistrate of Guanqian County.

LI YAN 李沿: Assistant magistrate of Guanqian County.

WU YI 武义: Lieutenant of Guanqian County.

NAMES, HONORIFICS, & TITLES

Diminutives, Nicknames, and Name Tags

A-: Friendly diminutive. Always a prefix. Usually for monosyllabic names, or one syllable out of a two-syllable name.

DA-: A character meaning "eldest." Can be used as a prefix.

-ER: Usually a character meaning "child." When added to a name as a suffix, it expresses affection. However, Feng Xiao's nickname, "Feng-er," uses a different character that means "second." Thus, in *Peerless*, "Feng-er" is an abbreviated way of saying "Deputy Bureau Chief Feng Xiao."

LAO-: A friendly prefix meaning "old."

XIAO-: A character meaning "small" or "youngest." When added to a name as a prefix, it expresses affection.

Courtesy Addresses

GONGZI: A respectful address for young men, originally only for those from affluent households. Though appropriate in all formal occasions, it's often preferred when the addressee outranks the speaker.

LANG: A general term for "man." Can be used to politely address a man by pairing it with other characters that denote his place within a certain household. For example, "dalang," "erlang," and "sanlang" mean "eldest son," "second son," and "third son" respectively. "Langjun" is a polite address for any man, similar to "gentleman."

NIANG: A general term for “woman,” which can be appended as a suffix. Follows the same pairing rules as “lang.” “Niangzi” is a variant that can be used alone to address any woman, similar to “lady.”

SHIDI: Younger martial brother, used to refer to younger disciples of the same generation.

XIANDI: A respectful address for a younger man.

XIANSHENG: A polite address for men, originally only for those of great learning or those who had made significant contributions to society. Sometimes seen as an equivalent to “Mr.” in English.

XIONG: A word meaning “elder brother.” It can be attached as a suffix to address an unrelated male peer.

Martial Arts and Tutelage

SHIXIONG: Older martial brother.

SHIDI: Younger martial brother. For junior male members of one’s own sect, or junior male disciples of one’s own master.

SHIMEI: Younger martial sister. For junior female members of one’s own sect, or junior female disciples of one’s own master.

SHIMU: The wife of one’s master.

SHIBO: Martial uncle. For the shixiong of one’s master.

Other

XIANZHI: Virtuous nephew. A respectful address for the son of one’s friends.

-CHANSHI: a suffix meaning monk.

APPENDIX

Glossary

GLOSSARY

CONCUBINES: In ancient China, it was common practice for a wealthy man to take women as concubines in addition to his wife. They were expected to live with him and bear him children. Generally speaking, a greater number of concubines correlated to higher social status, hence a wealthy merchant might have two or three concubines, while an emperor might have tens or even a hundred.

DIVINATION: Fortune-telling was an art of the highly learned in ancient China, with many separate branches, all rooted in Daoism. One example was physiognomy, where one reads a person's fate and state of health through their facial features, complexion, body, and bones. Another was geomancy, often known as feng shui, where the diviner could read the "auspiciousness" associated with a location or placement via the qi flowing through the area. Another is Ziping divination, where the fortune teller calculates one's fate through their birth date.

NINE-RANK SYSTEM: During the Sui dynasty, officials were divided into ranks, which denoted their status within the court. First rank was the highest, ninth rank the lowest.

QIXI FESTIVAL: Also known as Chinese Valentine's Day. Taking place on the seventh day of the seventh lunar month, it celebrates the yearly reunion of the Cowherd (Altair) and the Weaver Girl (Vega).

TRADITIONAL CHINESE MEDICINE: Traditional medical practices in China are commonly based around the idea that qi, or vital energy, circulates in the body through channels called meridians similarly to how blood flows through the circulatory system. Acupuncture points, or acupoints, are special nodes, most of which lie along the meridians. Stimulating them by massage, acupuncture, or other methods is believed to

affect the flow of qi and can be used for healing—or in wuxia, to render someone unconscious.

Another central concept in traditional Chinese medicine is that disease arises from an imbalance of elements in the body caused by disharmony in internal functions. For example, an excess of internal heat can cause symptoms such as fever, thirst, insomnia, and redness of the face. Excess internal heat can be treated with the consumption of foods with cooling properties, such as lotus tea.

YIN ENERGY AND YANG ENERGY: Yin and yang is a concept in Chinese philosophy that describes the complementary interdependence of opposite and contrary forces. It can be applied to all forms of change and difference. Yang represents the sun, masculinity, and the living, while yin represents the shadows, femininity, and the dead, including spirits and ghosts. In fiction, imbalances between yin and yang energy may do serious harm to the body or act as the driving force for malevolent spirits seeking to replenish whichever energy they lack.

Footnotes

Chapter 118

[1] A parable from Book 14 of The Analects, a foundational Confucian text.

Chapter 125

[2] A-Dou was also the nickname of Liu Shan, the famously incompetent ruler of the Shu Han dynasty. His father Liu Bei entrusted him to the great strategist Zhuge Liang, who perished in his service.

Chapter 126

[3] Originally referred to a single, faint star that could be seen between the fourth and seventh stars of the Big Dipper. It's used as a metaphor for grave misfortune, or an existence that brings disaster to others.

Chapter 135

[4] Lines taken from "Big Rat," a poem in the section "Airs of the States: Odes of Wei [2]" from The Book of Songs, the oldest collection of poetry in Chinese tradition.

Chapter 145

[5] Wine someone must drink as a forfeit for refusing a toast, used as an idiom for doing something the hard way.

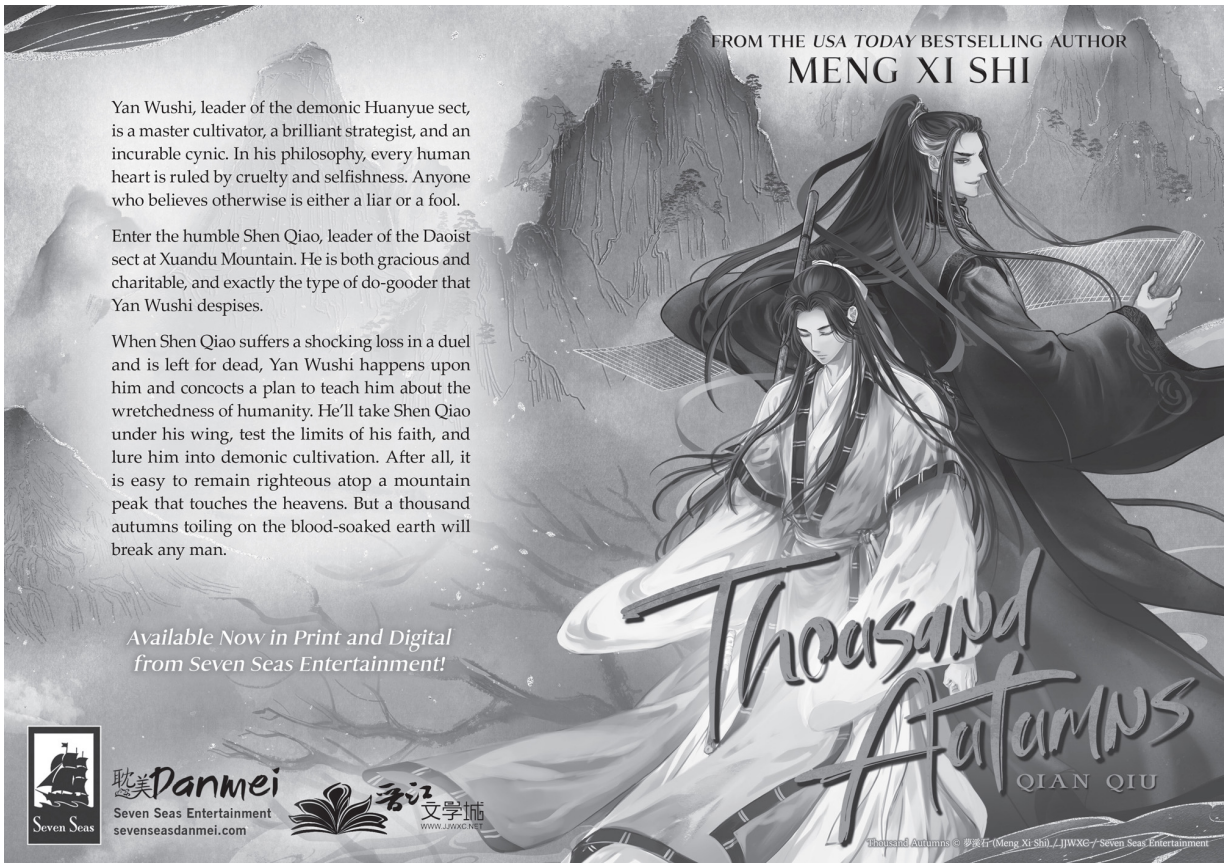
Chapter 152

[6] From Chapter 41 of the Daodejing, one of the two foundational texts of Daoism, attributed to Laozi.

About the Author

Meng Xi Shi

Meng Xi Shi is a renowned web author whose works of fiction combine detailed research with witty writing, winning the hearts of readers around the world. Her works are published in China by Jingjiang Literature City. She goes by “Meng Xi Shi Ya” on Weibo.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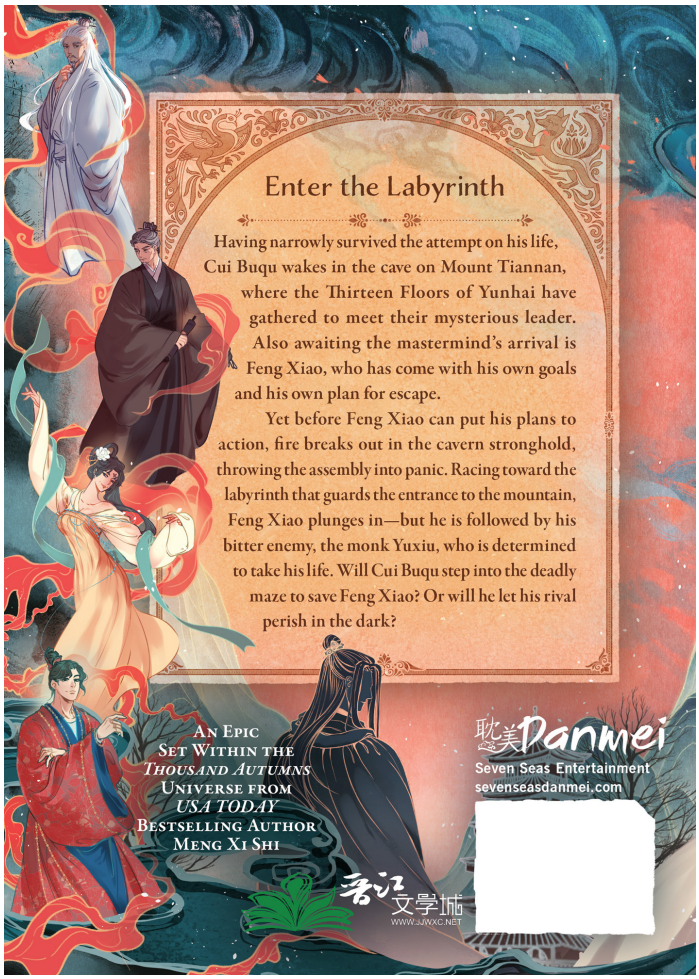
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